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INTERZONE

ISSUE 204

SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY

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EDITORIAL



Congratulations to Pawel Lewandowski who won the BSFA Award for Best Artwork of 2005 for his *Interzone* 200 cover (left, and please visit Pawel's website at levangallery.com).

Other winners include *Air* by Geoff Ryman for Best Novel, and 'Magic For Beginners' by Kelly Link for Best Short Story.

With quite a few *Interzone* stories still being considered for various awards and anthology reprints, so far Dominic Green's 'The Clockwork Atom Bomb' and Chris Beckett's 'Piccadilly Circus' will appear in Gardner Dozois's *Year's Best SF* 23; Lauren McLaughlin's 'Sheila', Alaya Dawn Johnson's 'Third Day Lights', and Rudy Rucker's 'Guadalupe and Hieronymus Bosch' will appear in David Hartwell & Kathryn Cramer's *Year's Best SF* 11; Paul Di Filippo's 'The Emperor of Gondwanaland' will appear in Jonathan Strahan's *Very Best Fantasy*. More such reports next time perhaps.

Next issue will see a fantastic new story by Sean McMullen called 'The Measure of Eternity' (illustrated by an artist new to *Interzone*, Bruce Richardson), Justin Stanchfield's 'In The River' (Richard Marchand's artwork is breathtaking), and much more, including a cover by Fahrija Velic, last seen on the front of issue 201. Also coming up we have Andy Hedgecock's exhaustive interview with Terry Pratchett, which goes a long way towards making amends for the rubbish we served up a few issues ago. The cover price rises to £3.75 – long overdue we think – but the US and subscription prices will not change.

We trust that all overseas subscribers received their copies of issue 203 much quicker than they did issue 202. As usual, please let us know via the online discussion forum (tappress.com/discus), which you can also use to comment on this issue or the magazine generally, or indeed any other topic you'd care to mention!



AS OTHERS SEE US

Adam Rogers of *Wired* soaked up the ambience of a Neil Gaiman signing in New York City: 'Whenever Gaiman appears, geeks of every type turn out in droves: beautiful goth girls with oil-black hair and cherry-red lips, overweight comics nerds (with dates), underweight comics nerds (with dates), science fiction obsessives, manga fanatics.' (*Wired*, April)

2006 HUGO NOMINATIONS

The novel shortlist: Ken MacLeod, *Learning the World*; George R.R. Martin, *A Feast for Crows*; John Scalzi, *Old Man's War*; Charles Stross, *Accelerando*; Robert Charles Wilson, *Spin*. Besides MacLeod and Stross, the full list includes several more Brits. Mike Ashley's *Transformations* and my *The SEX Column* are shortlisted for Related Book, while Dramatic Presentation (Short Form) is crammed with *Doctor Who* episodes and 2005 Glasgow Worldcon performances. *Interzone* (like *Ansible*)

can gloat over its usual Semiprozine nomination, and Dominic Green's 'The Clockwork Atom Bomb' – from IZ198 – is a Short Story finalist.

Jim Rigney (Robert Jordan), told *Locus*: 'I have been diagnosed with amyloidosis. That is a rare blood disease which affects only eight people out of a million each year...' His treatment (drastic bone marrow replacement) began in April; he's determined to beat the statistics that suggest a median life expectancy of four years.

Alma Alexander slipped the surly bonds of Earth: 'I am still reeling in wonder from it – but NASA chose a fragment of a poem of mine to go on a commemorative poster about women astronauts in the USA...'

Paul Parsons, editor of the BBC science magazine *Focus*, was admired for his diligence in devoting no fewer than ten

DAVID LANGFORD'S ANSIBLE LINK



▲ Stanislaw Lem
◀ Octavia Butler

pages of the April issue to promoting *The Science of Doctor Who* by some chap called Paul Parsons. The book – not published by the BBC – also gets a plug in his editorial, and is reviewed in the books section by our own Alastair Reynolds. (*Independent*, 22 March)

MORE AWARDS

British Book Awards: J.K. Rowling's *Whispering Name and the Half-Blood Prince* was voted overall Book of the Year on 29 March, beating various celebrity autobiographies and cookbooks. The 'popular fiction' winner was *The Time Traveller's Wife* by Audrey Niffenegger (BBC).

The James Tiptree Jr Award for best 'gender-exploring' novel of 2005 went to Geoff Ryman's *Air*.

AS OTHERS SEE US II

Radio 4 *Open Book* discussed the Gollancz Fantasy Masterworks edition of *Something Wicked This Way Comes*. Joanne Harris of

Chocolat fame deplored this appearance of a decent book under the fantasy label, and Mariella Frostrup revealed that Bradbury had suffered worse indignities: 'Some people even refer to him as a science fiction author, however erroneous that may be.'

PUBLISHERS AND SINNERS

Amazing Stories magazine, launched in 1926 by Hugo Gernsback, has been officially cancelled (after 14 months in limbo) by its current owner Paizo Publishing.

AS OTHERS SEE US III

News of the 'Trek Passions' on-line dating service sparked rhetoric of great originality at Popwatch: 'I'd always assumed *Star Trek* fans reproduced asexually, like tribbles, but apparently they find love the way the rest of us do: on the Internet. If you like candlelit dinners, moonlight strolls, and debating whether or not *Farscape* was a better show than *Babylon 5*, then *Trek Passions* is the personals site for you.'

NEBULA AWARDS

Novel shortlist: Geoff Ryman, *Air*; Joe Haldeman, *Camouflage*; Terry Pratchett, *Going Postal*; Susanna Clarke, *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell*; Jack McDevitt, *Polaris*; John C. Wright, *Orphans of Chaos*.

Fay Wray of *King Kong* fame is to appear on a Canadian stamp, part of a 26 May set whose theme is Canadians in Hollywood.

THOG'S MASTERCLASS

Dept of Persistent Engrams. 'Doug fought the memory. It had happened before he'd been born.' (Ben Bova, *Moonwar*, 1997)
Dept of Moderate Ruthlessness. "If you make a sound, I will kill you where you stand." / "What do you mean?" he asked in amazement. / "Exactly what I say. We have returned from..." (Captain S.P. Meek, 'Awlo of Ulm', 1931)

Neat Tricks Dept. 'She shrugged with her buttocks.' (Ron Goulart, *The Enormous Hourglass*, 1976)

R.I.P.

Peter Benchley (1940–2006), US author famous for *Jaws* (1974), died on 11 February aged 65. A genre venture was *White Shark* (1994), featuring a Nazi-engineered man/shark hybrid.

Octavia Butler (1947–2006), distinguished and much-admired black US sf author, died with shocking unexpectedness on 25 February after a fall. She was 58. Butler won 1984 Hugo awards for 'Bloodchild' (short story) and 'Speech Sounds' (novelette); the latter also won the Nebula, as did her 1998 novel *Parable of the Talents*.

Ronald Anthony Cross (1937–2006), US author whose first sf story appeared in 1973, died in March. Since 1994 he had published several volumes of his 'Eternal Guardians' fantasy series.

Dan Curtis (1928–2006), Hollywood producer/director who created the TV series *Dark Shadows* (1966–1971), died on 27 March; he was 77.

Ivor Cutler (1923–2006), surrealist Scots writer and singer whose eccentric tales often had a flavour of sf, died on 3 March aged 83. Story collections include *Cock-a-doodle-don't*, *Gruts* and *Fremesley*. He appeared as Buster Bloodvessel in the Beatles' *Magical Mystery Tour*.

Nancy A. Dibble (1942–2006), US author and fan who in the 1970s/1980s published sf as Ansen Dibell, died on 7 March. She was 63.

David Feintuch (1944–2006), US author best known for his popular 'Seafort' series of Hornblower-in-space sf adventures that began in 1994 with *Midshipman's Hope*, died on 16 March. He was 61. The first Seafort novels won him the 1996 Campbell award for best new writer.

Richard Fleischer (1916–2006), Hollywood director whose first major film was *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* (1954), died on 25 March aged 89. His other genre films include *Fantastic Voyage*, *Dr Doolittle* (the 1967 original), and *Soylent Green*.

Stanislaw Lem (1921–2006), not only Poland's greatest science fiction author but one whose sf greatness was recognized worldwide, died on 27 March; he was 84. His books sold more than 27 million copies, with translations into over 40 languages. The twice-filmed *Solaris* embodied his favourite theme of the unfathomability of the alien, also explored in *The Invincible*, *His Master's Voice* and others. Lem's lighter side, dazzlingly rather than dourly intellectual, was seen in such works as *The Cyberiad*, *The Futurological Congress* and *The Star Diaries*, whose extravagant wordplay challenged the translator. Several of his speculative 'non-fact' essays were worthy of Borges. He gave up writing sf, and indeed fiction, in 1989.

John Morressy (1930–2006), US academic and author who published many sf and fantasy novels, died on 25 March aged 76.

INTERVIEW

INTERVIEW JOHN PICACIO INTERVIEWED by STEVE BADRICH

John Picacio is an award-winning illustrator who has created covers for works by Harlan Ellison, Michael Moorcock, Robert Silverberg, Neil Gaiman, Robert Heinlein, Joe R. Lansdale, Jeffrey Ford, Graham Joyce, Lucius Shepard, Justina Robson, David Gemmell, L.E. Modesitt Jr, Frederik Pohl, Hal Clement, and many, many more. In 1992, he earned a Bachelor of Architecture degree from the University of Texas at Austin. Four years later, he illustrated his first book – the 30th Anniversary Edition of Michael Moorcock's *Behold the Man*. In May 2001, he chose a career in illustration over a career in architecture and devoted himself full-time to the craft of illustration.

Since then, his client list has continued to grow, including companies such as Random House/Del Rey, HarperCollins/Eos, Tor Books, Pocket Books, Pyr, MonkeyBrain Books, Viking Children's Books, Roc Books, Tachyon, Golden Gryphon Press, Orion/Gollancz, Night Shade Books, Earthling, *Realms of Fantasy* magazine and, with this issue, *Interzone*.

In 2002, he received the International Horror Guild Award for Best Artist. In 2005, he received a Chesley Award (for Best Paperback Cover) and he was a finalist for the Hugo Award (Best Professional Artist). Later the same year, he received the much-coveted World Fantasy Award (Artist). He was recently named for a second time as a finalist for the Hugo Award.

His work has been featured in many annuals and art compendiums, including *Spectrum: The Best in Contemporary Fantastic Art*, *Aphrodisia* and *Renderosity*.

Cover Story: The Art of John Picacio, a 200-page major hardcover of the best of his cover work, is available now, courtesy of MonkeyBrain Books. He lives in San Antonio, Texas, with his partner and fiancée Traci. For more info and images, please see johnpicacio.com.

John was interviewed exclusively for *Interzone* by Steve Badrich.



above: Photograph by Traci Ogden

below: Cover illustration for the Walter M. Miller Jr. classic *A Canticle For Leibowitz* (forthcoming in June from HarperCollins/Eos). © 2006 John Picacio
"It was an honor to be part of the legacy of a great book like *A Canticle For Leibowitz*"



JOHN PICACIO : COVER STORY

background: Wraparound cover illustration for *Live Without A Net* edited by Lou Anders (Penguin/Roc Books). © 2006 John Picacio

"This is still one of my favorite pieces. I had a blast painting this one"





right: Cover of the Frederik Pohl classic *Gateway* (Ballantine/Del Rey). © 2006 John Picacio
 "This book blew me away when I read it. Frederik Pohl is one of the all-time greats"



Mr Picacio, isn't it the case that you're an honors graduate of the prestigious architecture program at the University of Texas in Austin? If so, whatever possessed you to take up the gypsy life of a freelance artist?

I guess it was in the blood all along. The simple answer is I was good at architecture, but I loved illustration first and I eventually realized it was what I loved most. I started working immediately in architecture after I graduated from college, but at the same time, I started up my own comic book company called Maverick Studios with my friend Fernando Ramirez. We both loved comics since we were kids and we published an anthology called *Words & Pictures*, where we wrote and drew our own stories. I also did the covers for those comics. Publishers took note and that's when I started getting offers to do covers for their books. That's where this cover career came from. I wouldn't trade it for anything.

Did you distribute *Words & Pictures* yourself?

No, Diamond distributed them, just like all the other comics out there. I think at that time there were more distributors than just Diamond, so we were lucky in that our comics reached a lot more people than we knew of, in the short time that we were working on them.

I remember Fernando and I set up a booth for Maverick Studios at the 1995 San Diego Comic Con and this kid walked up to us with a beat-up issue of our first comic book and asked us to sign it. He had a thick French accent and he told me that he had taken a panel from my story 'The Big Fish Story' and blown it up on a copy machine and tacked it to his ceiling above his bed in Paris. He said he did it so that it was the first thing he saw when he woke up in the morning. That blew my mind. Not only the fact that the work had connected with someone on that level, but the fact that the work was finding its way over into Europe. So I guess we were distributed reasonably well.

What artists originally influenced your work in comics?

Back in the day, guys like José Luis Garcia Lopez, Dick Giordano and Neal Adams. Fairly realistic pen-and-ink guys. My tastes eventually diversified and I started appreciating guys like Bill Sienkiewicz and Frank Miller, and that eventually led to guys like George Pratt, Dave McKean, Kent Williams, Jon Muth and Duncan Fegredo, amongst others.

When you start to appreciate someone's work, you want to know as much as you can about them. Or at least I do, anyway. I started researching what influenced these guys, and that led me to delve deeper into folks like Jeff Jones, Egon Schiele, Gustav Klimt, Kathe Kollwitz, Howard Pyle, N.C. Wyeth, Kurt Schwitters, Bob Peak, Robert Rauschenberg, Salvador Dali, Frank Frazetta and Pablo Picasso. The whole world opened up. So yeah, comics are what opened the door to all of that.



background: Wraparound cover illustration for *Live! From Planet Earth* by George Alec Effinger (Golden Gryphon). © 2006 John Picacio

"I had never read Effinger's work until Golden Gryphon asked me to do the covers for his books. What a genius this guy was. It seems like there's nothing he couldn't write well. I wish I could've met him"

Were you a hard-core reader of science fiction as a youth? What was your first science fiction commission?

The 30th Anniversary Edition of Michael Moorcock's *Behold The Man*...that was my first cover gig, science fiction or otherwise. I did the cover and I did all of the interior design of the book, including illustrated chapter headers. Pretty ambitious for a first-timer. I'm forever grateful to Mike for having faith in me. At the time, I certainly knew who he was and I knew he was one of the giants of the field, but admittedly I grew up on film more than science fiction literature. So I wasn't the literary junkie that I am now, but even then I came into the job with huge respect for the books and the authors. Reading *Behold The Man* caused me to turn a corner, not only professionally, but also in terms of my reading tastes. When I did that book, it changed everything for me. I knew at that point, my days in architecture were numbered and that I wanted to be a professional illustrator.

So after 1998, one thing led to another: editors noticed your distinctive work and gave you additional commissions? Is that how it happened?

Yeah, but it was a slow process. It's not like they all lined up to hand me plum gigs with big piles of cash. I think a key to the whole process was something Mike told me early in the game with *Behold The Man*. I asked him, "What kind of visual direction are you looking for me to take this project?" He said something like, "Look, you're here because you've obviously got some talent, and I want you to take this thing wherever it's best to take it. I trust you to give it your all, and I want you to use your own vision and your own judgment." Here I am at that point, a guy who's never done a cover before, and then there's Mike as one of the legendary authors of all time, and I think it would have been so easy at that moment for him to assert his ►



background: Wraparound cover illustration for Jeffrey Ford's *The Empire of Ice Cream* (Golden Gryphon). © 2006 John Picacio

"Jeff Ford is one of the greatest writers in genre fiction. I get jazzed anytime I get to do a cover for one of his books. I'm betting this is going to be one of the best collections of 2006"



above: Unpublished illustration. This is the cover illustration originally intended for *Futureshocks* (edited by Lou Anders), but the publisher deemed this image too controversial for publication. © 2006 John Picacio
"Another dynamite anthology from the great Lou Anders. I don't have a huge problem with the way the cover turned out, but this image would have been so much more powerful"

◀ control over the thing and say "Here's what I want," but instead he respected me as a creator. I didn't realize it at that time, but I think that critical moment set the tone for my career.

I always feel like it's my job to read the manuscript and filter it through my own processes and take the cover and the client where they haven't been before, and to try to get as close to the core of the book's intentions as possible. So as I slowly built a portfolio, I think it was apparent to folks that I wasn't just building a collection of stock visual responses and clichés that are driven by a sales and marketing team that's never read the book. I was trying to find something special in each book and bring it out on the covers. It took some time, years really, but I think most of the clients that come to me are looking for what goes on in my head as much as what comes out of my hands. And that's the way it should be, I think.

Here comes our geek question. Can you tell us something about the technical side of your art? Old-school guy that I am, I assume that I'm looking at computer-mediated works, not at oil on canvas, let's say. Is that correct?

Not quite. The truth is that I'm drawing and painting everything you see via traditional methods and means, and then taking those bits to the computer and scanning them in and collaging them together. Drawing and painting are the two things I love to do, but I'm not interested in doing either with a computer and a keyboard. So everything you see on my covers starts off as pencils on illustration board and I usually build up a pretty tight underdrawing. Then I spot all of my solid black areas in acrylic. From here, I do a full greyscale oil painting study on top of that, using only black, white, and grey oil paints, and that's where all of the values come from in the final piece. This is not new stuff. This is old Renaissance method. Rembrandt used to do a greyscale oil underpainting and then build up his color values on top.

So once I've got my greyscale oil painting, I'll seal it and then I'll go back to my tubes of paint, and start painting swatches and collages of color relative to the palette for the piece that I see in my head and I'll paint these color studies on separate boards. I then take all of this hand-made stuff and either scan it or photograph it and bring it into the computer and start to study, collage and merge the bits together via Photoshop. It's total alchemy because I have a pretty strong idea of where I want the piece to go, but sometimes I'll see something that surprises me when I'm digitally juxtaposing and collaging and that will lead me in a direction that I wouldn't have thought of before. These surprises are largely the reason that I like to work this way. I'm really not interested in repeating the same stock responses, and I think part of my job is to open that door where a fresh response might be and to capitalize on it, and when I start to collage some of my painted bits together, I often see responses that I wouldn't have seen otherwise if I were just painting everything on a single traditional canvas.

I find it exhausting even to contemplate working this hard on a single cover, however memorable. And yet your immediately recognizable work suddenly seems to be turning up everywhere. Have you had yourself cloned?

I just bust my hump, man. People invite me to do covers, and I'm lucky to get a lot of choice gigs and I just buckle down and keep working. It's that simple. I'm in love with this stuff. I love doing covers for works by folks on the cutting-edge of our scene like Charles Stross, Justina Robson and Sean Williams, but I also love getting the opportunity to work on the classics too. I just got finished doing a cover for a new US edition of *A Canticle For Leibowitz* and right now I'm working on a new cover for a US edition of Robert Heinlein's *Red Planet*. At the same time that I'm doing the Heinlein, I'm working on covers for a brand new Mike Resnick space opera called *Starship: Pirate*; a brand new, futuristic Alan Dean Foster thriller called *Sagaramanda*; and a brand new anthology of cutting-edge sf short stories called *Fast Forward*, edited by Lou Anders. So it's fun to work on vintage stuff at the same time that you're working on more cutting-edge books. I love it all.

I have to ask: what will be on your cover for *Red Planet*? Back before Sputnik, that was the first work of science fiction I ever read.

I'm still working on it, so it's still in flux. It certainly won't be a literal scene from the book. I'm thinking of something more abstract. The book was written in the forties, and it's a time-honored classic, but I think in today's marketplace it would be considered more of a young-adult novel. The alien in the book is this round ball of fur with three retractable eye stalks and the thing bounces around all over the place. So instead of going for the cute and literal, I thought I'd really study those three eyes and make that the focus of the cover. Maybe we see the young protagonist reflected in one of the eyeballs. Something like that...

A distinct touch! As so often happens in Heinlein's works, there's a revolution in that novel. Did you know that the young Heinlein tried to get Upton Sinclair elected as the first socialist governor of California? If he were still with us, Heinlein might have to rethink his later, dark-side politics. Well, there have certainly been enough disturbances in the Force to warrant some revolution these days. Sign me up for it. [laughs]

Okay, here's the difficult question: so many of your works seem to me to involve transformation – someone or something caught in the act of turning into something else. These works might almost be illustrations for a contemporary edition of the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid, Shakespeare's favorite science fiction writer. Is this a conscious theme of yours? Does it have something to do with the technical means you use?

Wow, that's interesting. I've never thought of any themes that cut across my work. I'm usually responding to a book or a manuscript that I'm working on, so if there are any

broader themes happening in my work, I may be the last to know, I guess.

I had a semester in architecture school under a professor named Marcos Novak, and the subject of the whole semester was 'becoming'. We were dealing with that theme in architectural terms of course, but I suspect those studies may have had a lingering effect on my illustration work. If they do, it's certainly not conscious, but it may be there, all the same. I pretty much come into any cover assignment with a blank slate and no agendas, but once I read the manuscript, part of the magic of the process is how I filter it. The main things I'm looking for are the book's strengths and intentions, and I'm trying to present those things in a thoughtful, provocative way on the cover. That's really what I'm after, but as far as a theme of transformation, that's really curious, because I can see how there are certain illustrations that seem to drive in that direction. Two: *Trains Running*, *Bloom*, *The Fantasy Writer's Assistant*... those come to mind. I think the fact that transformation may rear its head in my work is less a by-product of my personal

technical means as it is the nature of the way good genre stories and the best myths work.

Surely our readers can make up their own minds when the big John Picacio book comes out. When will that be? What will be in it?

It's set for a May 2006 release from MonkeyBrain Books. It's called *Cover Story: The Art of John Picacio*, and it's 200 pages of my cover art with sketches and little spiels about process, design, and where some of the ideas come from. Michael Moorcock was kind enough to write a fine introduction for the book, and there's a nice fat interview with me by Joseph McCabe, who's built a reputation lately for doing juicy interviews. He's the author of *Hanging with the Dream King: Interviews with Neil Gaiman and his Collaborators*. I'm quite proud of *Cover Story* because not only is it the first official collection of my cover work, but I designed the book all the way through, from cover to cover. So if nothing else, it's an honest snapshot of where I am right now, flaws and all. Hopefully I'll keep evolving from here... ■

below: Wraparound cover illustration for James Morrow's *The Cat's Pajamas & Other Stories* (Tachyon), © 2006 John Picacio. "One of my favorite wraparound covers I've ever done. My fiancée hates the scary face on the back"



Longing for Langalana

I wince at the intensity of the Earth Emissary's beauty, and take a step backward. Despite my decades of exposure to his people, the mere sight of this uniformed young man, this stranger, still causes powerful feelings to bubble to the surface reflexively. As he strides into the room, his emerald-green eyes glitter. The resemblance to Phinny is uncanny. He nods a greeting and sits down at the conference room table. His pink, smooth-skinned brilliance makes me squint, and I have to turn my back to him to combat the giddiness. Facing the thick-plated window, I observe the dull, gray moonscape, the dead dust dunes stretching off into the horizon, softly lit by the indigo glow of Langalana overhead.

I struggle against the urge to stare at his hazy reflection in the glass.

"An Emissary, eh?" I say, leaning heavily on my red-furred cane. "Your father would be proud." Peeking over my shoulder, I point to the wicker bowl on the glass table, my finger trembling ever so slightly. "Please, help yourself to some *chapra*. But chew the leaf slowly. Its nectar is very, very sweet. Your father used to love it when he was a boy, you know."

I slowly rub the scales on my chin and gesture toward the massive, reddish planet that fills half the black sky. "Magnificent, eh?" Mauve clouds encircle its equator and dark purplish seas stand out starkly between three large landmasses.

"To think, our peoples traveled so far, endured so much. But in the end, Langalana spurned us," I say. "And so, we've been left to pine from afar, to dream about what could have been."

I turn around and dare to look directly at him again.

The young man sucks gingerly on the tip of the red-leafed *chapra*. Like his father, a majestic swath of thick, yellow fibers sheathes his closed cranium and falls to his shoulders. A profound love causes me to ache and shudder; I shake my head and avert my gaze again.

"I know why you're here," I say.

From my sleeping quarters I spied the silver landbuzzer – a glinting pinprick in the distance – speeding toward us. As if riding choppy waves, it skimmed atop the undulating, scarlet-furred grasslands that stretched in every direction. The buzzer

clattered up to the reed fence that surrounded our hearth and two humans – an older female and a young boy not much taller than me – clambered out of its sidecars.

I froze, open-mouthed, for I had never seen an actual alien before. In the weeks since landfall – when our Wergen brethren left us and continued onward to the Northern Continent – these were the first pilgrims we had encountered. I'd been told that they came in magnificent shades of pink and brown and yellow, like the Visian demigods of our mythology, but to actually see them with my own eyes... Rather than a single breathing canal, they bore two tiny holes in the center of their faces beneath a protruding skin-covered bone. Tossed, colored fibers covered the tops of their rounded heads. But most striking of all, a rainbow-colored aura that I can only describe as a coating of pure, unadulterated beauty shimmered about them. I bent down and peeped at them over the windowsill as they approached our front yard. The old female conversed casually with Father and Elkah, both of whom worked the fields with the bots. Although I longed to see the aliens up close, I felt paralyzed by a sudden overwhelming shyness.

"Shimera!" Father called out. His voice, though loud, sounded shaky.

I hesitated for just an instant before bolting through the central fireroom to the hearth's front archway. Father and Elkah stood side by side, both clutching their bunched-up tether – for when they stood so close together there was a chance that one of them might stumble over it or become entangled.

"Shimera, these are our new neighbors, Dr Zooey Crest and her nephew, Phineas." As he spoke to me, Father kept his eyes fixed on the humans.

When I tried to return the aliens' greeting, I found myself breathless. I could only nod.

"I was hoping, young lady," Dr Crest said, "that you might be able to tutor my nephew in the Wergen tongue." She said this in perfect, unaccented Wergenese. "I'm inundated with lab work, and Phinny could really benefit from some personal instruction. He knows just a few words and phrases."

by Mercurio D. Rivera





As Dr Crest spoke, the boy, Phinny, stood behind her, gawking at the tether that connected Father and Elkah's craniums.

"Say hello to our neighbors, Phinny," Dr Crest instructed the boy, switching to Earthen. "In Wergenese."

The boy stayed hidden behind his aunt's pleated, white skirt and shouted out a badly accented 'hello'. While the adults continued speaking, he shifted his gaze to me and stuck out his dark pink tongue. I smiled, marveling at this strange and wonderful human greeting.

"Shimera would be honored to tutor the boy," Elkah said.

When Phinny looked at me again, I bashfully stuck out my own colorless tongue, which couldn't extend nearly as far as the human's.

The boy laughed delightedly and Dr Crest glanced at me, raising an eyebrow. "Yes, well...Phinny will come by around midday tomorrow."

"You really must visit for dinner," Father said.

"Yes, please, we insist," Elkah added.

Dr Crest shot us a strange look, one I had difficulty reading, and shook her head slowly. "That's very kind of you, but I'm afraid we're going to have to pass. Some urgent gengineering experiments require my attention."

"Can we come by and help clear your fields?" Father asked.

"Perhaps assist you with your lab work?" Elkah said. "Really, there must be some way we can help."

Several lines appeared across Dr Crest's forehead. "That's quite all right. The Wergen bots are managing the fieldwork just fine, thank you. And I work best alone."

"Are you sure - ?"

Her glare cut Father off in mid-sentence. "Good day." She grabbed the boy's hand, turned, and marched off.

Father and Elkah bowed their heads, embarrassed that they'd been too forward.

And as the landbuzzer receded into the distance Phinny looked over his shoulder, and I thought I saw his long, pink tongue stick out once again, greeting me in his special way.

"We were planetary pioneers, the 'heroic trailblazers' of Langalana," I say, my voice tinged with bitterness. "My father and Elkah performed the traditional Wergen function: maintenance of the fieldbots used by the pilgrims to clear large patches of the grasslands in preparation for the settlement's expansion. And Dr Crest studied soil samples and, months later, headed up a team of human gengineers responsible for crop production. This was years before the construction of the Science Institute, Emissary, years before the devastation had begun, before the landfall of hundreds of human exobiologists, anthropologists, entomologists."

I pace slowly, shifting my weight to my cane, and rub the scales on my chin.

The young man stares at me silently, impassively.

"But what did Phinny and I care about the logistics of settlement? We were just children, children exploring a vast new playground." I can't help it; my voice becomes wistful now. "Every morning Phinny came to my hearth for his lesson in Wergenese. Our conversations in those first few days - in Earthen, of course - were formal and very brief for, you see, I was still painfully shy around him.

"And as the days passed we became more comfortable in our surroundings, more comfortable around each other. Oh, the afternoons Phinny and I spent in those breathtaking grasslands! How many games we played! How many secrets we shared! One day, he told me he'd discovered a natural trail through the grasslands, a trail that twisted out towards the Purple Sea."

Elkah oversaw the skittering bots that cleared the growing grass in front of our hearth while Father prepared the meals inside. At that time, their cranial cord extended for almost a full ten meters and still sported the great elasticity so typical of the recently-tethered.

When we strolled past Elkah, her head jerked upward and her white eyes zoomed in on Phinny. "Where are you going, Phineas?" she asked.

"To the overlook," he replied in slightly accented Wergene. "For my lesson."

"Very well spoken," Elkah gushed. She patted his head and her fingers lingered in his yellow tresses. "You're an excellent student." At that very instant Father must have moved toward the rear of the hearth because Elkah's tether pulled slightly, causing her to take two steps backwards. "Olbodoh!" she shouted over her shoulder. "What is *wrong* with you?"

Phinny grabbed my hand – which pulsed with pleasure at his touch – and pulled me along to the recently discovered path that snaked in a southwesterly direction. Because the blue sun hovered directly over us, we cast no shadows as we wandered through the trail. The grasslands resembled nothing on Werg – or Earth apparently, judging from Phinny's wide-eyed reaction every time we moved through them. A deep crimson fur lined each blade of grass, and the fields literally swayed – not from the warm wind, but of their own volition – left, then right, in perfect rhythm.

From the twisting dirt path, the fields fell away and we emerged onto a jutting, rocky overlook. Shielding our eyes, we stood at the lip and marveled at the glorious, placid Purple Sea, kilometers below, lapping against the crystalline cliff side. A steady breeze blew, warm and silky and impossibly salty.

We set down our blankets and I began Phinny's lesson, instructing him on the nasal twangs that punctuate Wergene verbs. I found that Phinny had an impressive facility for languages, so much so that his skills approached Wergen levels. He always picked up the nuances quickly, biting his lip and concentrating intensely. Before long, however, a dam seemed to burst in his head – he'd hurl stones into the sea, or recite the Wergene alphabet while standing on his head, or break off a reed and challenge me to a duel, or lay on his stomach and spew a dewy substance from his mouth over the edge of the overlook – signaling the end of the lesson.

As we began our long hike back I could sense he had something on his mind he wanted to ask me. His reluctance to do so surprised me, for Phinny had questions and opinions about everything and in the weeks that I'd been tutoring him never once hesitated to voice them:

"Do you have any brothers or sisters?" he had asked.

"I had two sisters who died at birth," I replied.

"Why do fieldbots look like giant spiders? The Wergens should make them look, I don't know...friendlier," he said.

"The bots are modeled after Scythians – our pets on Werg."

His barrage had continued: "I wish I had those white Wergen scales. You shouldn't say you're 'colorless' – you're white, like chalk;" "The math and science holoprograms are boring, don't you think?" "I'm glad Aunt Zooey got assigned to Argenta rather than Inlandia;" "We're the luckiest kids ever, to be the first pilgrims on this continent;" "They say you can fit a hundred Earths into Langanana, but I don't believe it!" And so on.

I always answered in Wergene and we spent hours on that overlook, the afternoons vanishing into the sun's blue blaze as we chatted and played.

As was our practice, I walked him back to his habitation.

Sometimes I would wander inside to catch a glimpse of Dr Crest in her spacious laboratory, the rectangular gene-splicers lying on long tables and humming in the background. But today she stood at the entranceway in her white lab coat and waved for us to enter when she saw us approach.

Phinny and I entered the lab where Dr Crest stood in front of a table with a microscope, a blue syringe and odd-shaped metallic devices that scurried about the table on their own. "Did you have a good lesson, Phineas?"

"Yes, Aunt Zooey," Phinny said in Wergene. "Learned a lot."

"The watermelon is ready, if you'd like to try some."

Phinny jumped up and down and let out a whoop. Dr Crest had been trying for some time to engineer Earthen fruits and vegetables to grow in the garden behind their habitation.

"Can we have some right now?" Phinny said.

She hesitated. "Come here, Shimera."

Despite her wrinkled dermis, she radiated waves of beauty – like all humans – that made me feel tingly and happy to be alive. She gently grabbed my hand – an electric tickle buzzed through me – and placed it on the table, palm up. Her five fingers, so pink and dainty and dexterous, brushed my three digits with a sandpaper substance. "Let me do a quick run of your cell samples to make sure it's safe for you to eat these fruits," she said. "Phinny, why don't you run outside and cut up a melon."

Phinny scrambled out the door.

"Shimera, I've received Elkah and Olbodoh's daily dinner invitations, their notes and e-messages." Dr Crest removed a bundle of red slips of paper from her lab coat pocket and dangled them in front of me. "Tell them to stop it." She crumpled the invitations in her five-fingered, white-knuckled fist and tossed them into the waste bin. "You Wergens can be so goddamned overbearing."

The scanner beeped and Dr Crest stared into a monitor and made a peculiar gesture, raising her opposable digit in the air. "All clear. Enjoy the watermelon."

I face the Emissary, but make a conscious effort not to look him in the eye. He has finished the *chapra* and fingers the edges of the empty wicker bowl.

"From that brief exchange with Dr Crest, I learned at a very early age how important it was to suppress our feelings around humans, how our emotions make them uncomfortable, and can potentially drive them away. I promised myself at that moment that I would never make Phinny feel awkward around me. I would bottle up my feelings for him deep inside me rather than ever risk losing him," I say, my voice trembling.

"Keeping that promise proved more difficult than I could ever imagine. Your father's kindnesses, his generosity, his humor, all touched me deeply. I tried my best to contain myself around him, mind you, just not always with success."

I limp over to the window and press both my hands against it.

Following Phinny's lessons, he and I would sit in Dr Crest's garden in what he called the 'watermelon patch'. He'd split the melons with a long blade and we'd lifted out the pink centers eating them heartily, juice dribbling down our chins. We also occasionally sampled the succulent *chapra* that grew on the reeds of grass, a much sweeter food than the melons. As I've said, I preferred the taste and texture of the watermelons while Phinny loved the *chapra*.

One day, intoxicated with sugary *chapra*, Phinny finally blurted

out the questions that I sensed had been weighing on his mind.

"Shim, why do Wergens love humans?"

His directness frazzled me and I found it difficult to respond.

"What makes *us* so special?" he asked.

"Well...I mean, you're all so...beautiful." I blushed.

"You think so? Aunt Zooey thinks that it might be biological. Maybe the way we smell or something."

I didn't know what to say.

"Your father? And Elkah? Why are they, you know, tied together that way?" he asked. And from the look in his eyes I could sense that this subject, the tethering of Father and Elkah, was what interested him most of all. But I was painfully shy about the subject.

"They're tethered," I said, embarrassed.

After a few seconds, when he realized I would volunteer no more information, he asked, "Are your scales soft?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

Phinny shyly reached out to me. "Is it okay if I...?"

I nodded, and he gently brushed his hand along my cheekbone.

I know it's silly, but, sometimes, all of these decades later, I can still feel the warmth of his fingers tracing the crevices between my scales.

"They feel...rubbery...nice," he said. "On Earth only reptiles have scales." His gaze shifted to the *coronatis*, the leafy headdress that covered my cranium. "And what about your head..."

"That's personal," I said quickly, and he withdrew his hand sheepishly.

"Why do Wergens wear those things? Those leaf-hats?"

"To cover our...areas." I looked away from him again. "That's where our cords emerge. When it's time."

He digested this information. "Shim, do you think a Wergen could ever tether with a human?"

My hearts skipped. I shrugged.

"Do all of you get tethered?" he asked.

"After the tests are done, yes, for the most part."

"Tests?"

"Our medics always test our genes to make sure we're... compatible. Some persons have diseases that don't let them tether. And some people just choose not to," I said, looking downward. "That's not a good thing."

"Oh." And just like that, Phinny jumped to his feet and sprinted in the direction of my hearth. "Race you!"

I leapt to my feet and chased after him, laughing. "Wait! Wait!"

Perhaps it was because I stood slightly taller than Phinny, or because he constantly took instruction from me on Wergene, but he resented whenever I told him what to do outside of our lessons. Looking back, I suppose I did sometimes take a superior tone with him, but you have to understand, this sprung from my desire to protect him from the dangers that existed alongside Langalana's natural wonders.

All of that changed on one cool day, a day just like any other with magenta clouds looming overhead in the pink-tinted sky and the smell of snow in the air, the day that Dr Crest sent Phinny to my hearth to obtain an extension blade – one of the fieldbots had damaged a claw and she needed to replace it – and I decided to accompany him on his walk back home. The truth is, I not only wanted to be with Phinny, I also wanted to experience soaring over the grasslands in his landbuzzer, which his aunt had let him borrow.

As we accelerated away, Elkah and Father waved goodbye to Phinny from a window. "Goodbye, Father!" I shouted, smiling broadly, one hand on the handgrip and the other holding my

headdress in place. "Goodbye, Elkah!"

"Why don't you call Elkah 'mother'?" Phinny asked.

"Elkah isn't my mother, silly," I said, tittering at the absurdity of his comment. "Elkah is Father's second mate."

"So your parents are divorced?"

"Divorced?"

"Yeah, divorced. Like mine. They separated when they realized that they couldn't get along any more."

"Separated mates?" I shuddered. I had never heard anything more horrible, more...alien.

"Mom decided that it would be best for me to stay with Dad," he said. "She's a really important person on the Outer Council and doesn't have time for kids. But then Dad enrolled in the Delta Expedition. So he left me with Aunt Zooey." Phinny had a sad, faraway look in his eye I had never seen before.

I didn't know what to say, so I simply stared ahead.

We said nothing for a while. The buzzer skimmed the apex of the red blades, and we both held on to the handgrips as we surfed the waves of grass.

"So. Where is your mom?" he said. "On the Northern Continent?"

"Hah! She's here, just incorporated, Phinny!"

"What do you mean?"

"Don't you know what incorporation is, silly?"

Phinny straightened up. "Well, I've heard of it..."

"Oh, look! A manticola!" I shrieked. "Stop for a second."

I jumped off the sidecar and pushed my way through the tall, feathery grass to the bright yellow-and-white petals of the budding manticola stem. When I stooped down to take in its scent, I heard Phinny scream. He shoved me hard from behind, sending me sprawling to the ground.

As I tumbled, I saw it, there on a patch of grassless sand, emerging from a shadowy burrow. With a clicking sound, the thing twitched and unfolded its carapace segment by segment until it stood at eye level with Phinny. It was as thick as my leg, with a lightning-bolt shaped torso. Thorns covered its muscular chitinous sections, and it bore the same deep-red color as the surrounding grasslands. As I tried to figure out whether it was plant or insect, the creature screeched. It seemed poised to sink its sharp teeth into Phinny when he pulled the extension-blade from his pocket and lunged. He drove it right between the thing's four black, bulbous eyes, pounding the creature again and again, even after it had slumped to the ground.

I watched from ground level as Phinny flattened the creature's head with his blows until it lay in a red pool of viscous fluid. Only then did he stop.

I walked behind him and placed my hand on his back. "Did it bite you?" I asked.

In response, Phinny made a bizarre choking sound and disgorged chunks of semi-digested food onto the ground.

"Are you ill?"

He wiped his mouth. "Why did you run into the grass blades?" he shouted. "There's no path here! You *know* it's dangerous." He stomped off toward the landbuzzer.

I ran after him. "I can't wait to tell everyone, Phinny. You saved me. What was that thing? Weren't you even a little afraid? The way you struck it down, why, I've never seen such courage!"

He ignored me.

But as we rode back and I chattered on and on about his bravery Phinny's mood seemed to brighten. He stood straighter, with his chest puffed.

Following the incident, we were both so excited and flustered we got turned around without even realizing it and wound up back at my hearth. As we approached, I saw Elkah tending the fields and I leapt off the landbuzzer as it slowed – this time carefully staying on the sandy walking path – and shouted out what had happened as I ran toward her.

“That sounds like a grubber! There’ve only been a few of them spotted on the Northern Continent – uncommon, but dangerous creatures – but I didn’t know we had them here. How’d you know its weak spot, boy? Right between the eyes! I certainly wouldn’t want to be fighting off one of those things with nothing but a blade.” She patted Phinny on the back and shoulders. “Shimera, you have to be more careful. The boy could have been hurt.”

From that day, the dynamic changed between us. It’s hard to explain, but I no longer felt the same need to protect Phinny. I knew that he could take care of himself. Not only that, I knew that he could protect me too.

I slowly circle the table. The young Emissary looks at me curiously, as if staring at an experiment gone awry.

“Despite the large number of incoming human pilgrims over the years, Argenta’s population grew only slightly. Most arrivals settled in Inlandia or in provinces in the Northern and Western Continents.

“As for my people, you have to understand, Emissary, the Joint Venture Agreement provides that only five percent of the population can be Wergen. Given Langanalana’s sheer size, we were spread thin, to put it mildly. No Wergens lived in Inlandia. Our arriving pilgrims lived solely on the large continent in the north – an inconceivable distance from Argenta. As a result, I went almost a decade without seeing another of my kind – except for Father and Elkah, of course. A decade! Nevertheless, surrounded by beautiful humans – most importantly, in the company of Phinny – I consider these days on Langanalana, these halcyon days of my childhood, the happiest moments of my life.”

The Earth Emissary opens his mouth as if to say something.

I saw Phinny less frequently when he began to spend much of his time assisting other pilgrims with the construction of the farmhouses and plantations. Most often I would visit him at the work site where he helped Aunt Zooey’s team with the irrigation system. We would eat together at midday and discuss the latest developments on Langanalana.

He stopped by my hearth one morning to share the news that another starship jammed with over ten thousand humans was expected to arrive early next year. The plans to expand Inlandia to accommodate them needed to be expedited.

“I’m going to be working twelve-hour days, Shim: programming the bots to process grassland reeds, working with the engineers to diagram the city layout.”

“Phineas!” Father shouted, lumbering closely ahead of Elkah. With the cord fully extended, they could now walk only several feet apart. “My, but you’ve sprouted. What broad shoulders! You’ve been working the crop fields, eh?”

And, indeed, Phinny’s transformation had been dramatic. He’d grown much taller and his yellow fibers seemed paled by the sun to an almost golden white. His skin had browned and his body had become lean and taut.

After I guided him away – his beauty mesmerized Elkah and Father and prompted them to earwig him far beyond the point of

rudeness – he turned to me and whispered confidentially. “I never noticed before, but their tether...It seems to have shrunk.”

I blushed. Of course their tether had constricted. Father and Elkah had been mated for quite some time now. “I...I...”

“It’s okay, Shim. I know you don’t feel comfortable talking about it.” He turned to me. “It’s going to happen. I’m moving to Inlandia.” “Really?”

“Aunt Zooey’s getting older. She needs to continue her research in a less challenging environment. With the grubber swarms and the constant evacuations, it’s getting to be too much for her.”

I heard the words, but had trouble registering their meaning. “I think it’s admirable that you’re so loyal to Dr Crest.”

“It’s the least I can do after everything she’s done for me.”

My spirit sank as the reality set in. Although he’d been talking about this for some time, I never thought that the day would actually come. “When?”

“Next week. The bots need major reprogramming to assist with the construction of the highways and office buildings and sewage systems. And we need to clear several more miles of Inlandia’s grasslands.”

As we walked our familiar path to the overlook, the field’s color seemed to shift from red to purple.

“What about you, Shim? There’s plenty of opportunity in Inlandia, you know. The grubber infestation here has only gotten worse. And with your language skills – ”

“I can’t leave my hearth, Phinny. Not yet. Not until my Passage.”

“Your ‘Passage’?” He raised an eyebrow. “Isn’t it time you finally told me what this is all about?”

I hesitated, for our rituals are sacred, personal. But then again, this was Phinny. “When a Wergen reaches the age of maturity, there’s a Passage ceremony,” I explained. “A male stands with the female through the rites. But in my case...the nearest Wergen is on the other side of the planet. What am I to do, Phinny, swim across the ocean?”

“Well, it’s just a matter of time before we have the parts for the bots to construct spaceplanes – ”

“It doesn’t matter. I couldn’t perform the rites with a stranger.”

“I’ll stand with you,” Phinny said, just like that, his green eyes aglitter.

I felt like flut-fluts flew circles in my stomachs. “You would?”

“Hey, I’d do anything for you, Shim. You know that.” He reached out and caressed my cheek with the back of his hand, tracing the lines of my scales.

My hearts were so full that they seemed to expand into my throat and choke off my voice.

When we reached the overlook, he bent down to pick up a stone, which he shucked sidearm into the coruscating waters below. How many times had he done this over the years? Something about the familiarity of this act made my hearts swell even more.

And so on a chilly day, with the rising sun peeking from behind an amethyst cloudbank, we stood atop Piner’s Peak, the highest point nearest Argenta, and performed the rites. For as far as I could see, the grasslands shone like a vast coverlet of scarlet, shimmering in the indigo sunlight. On Werg, my closest friends would have attended the Passage Ceremony; here, just Phinny, Dr Crest, Elkah and Father stood by me. On Werg, my companion would have been a potential tethering mate; here, my sweet Phinny accompanied me, wearing the *coronatis* and ivy-laced ceremonial garb traditionally worn by Wergen males.

Father and Elkah – thrilled at Phinny’s participation – presided over the ceremony. They moved awkwardly, their tether now not more than six inches long and so taut that Elkah’s head leaned slightly to the left and Father’s tilted slightly to the right. By this time, Father had attained dominance so Elkah rarely spoke. As Father sang the Old Words, I removed my headdress, exposing my cranial cavity, and sang the song of adulthood.

I caught Phinny peeking for a second before averting his eyes.

My cheeks flushed and I felt my cranium moisten.

Father raised his arms and said the final words. And then chaos erupted.

Father drew his sidearm and a laser pulse fired. Phinny yanked on my arm as he stumbled, pulling me away from the sudden movement behind us. When I turned, a grubber’s carcass lay on the ground, steaming. Another one sprung at us and Father fired again. At the same time, a purple-thorned grubber loomed over Dr Crest, who held her hand over her face. Everything was happening in a heartbeat, and the shock rendered Dr Crest – indeed, all of us – silent. Unable to move quickly, Father and Elkah stumbled over each other and fell to the ground, the sidearm dropping out of Father’s hand. Without thinking, I hurled myself at the creature before it could strike at Dr Crest. As I collided with it, the grubber turned, a



blurry streak, and clamped onto my upper leg with its mandibles. While I rolled on the ground, the creature on top of me, a shot rang out and I found myself staring at the grubber's headless carapace.

"Are you all right?" Phinny asked, clutching Father's smoking firearm. But I could barely hear him over the scream – my own scream, I came to realize – as I spotted the thorns embedded in my thigh and the clear blood streaming from my shredded leg.

I lift my cane in the air and waggle it, shifting all my weight to my healthy leg trunk. "A memento."

The Emissary scratches his chin.



"Phinny and Dr Crest delayed their relocation to Inlandia for several weeks during my slow and painful recovery while Father and Elkah programmed the medibots to tend to me. But the venom proved beyond the bots' ability to treat. In fact, Father initially feared that the bots might find it necessary to amputate my leg, but Dr Crest intervened and worked to develop what we then thought would be an all-purpose anti-venom. You have to realize, Emissary, this was before we understood the true nature of the grubbers."

He stares blankly at me.

"Eventually the infection waned and my fever subsided," I explain. "Although my body ached during this period, my spirit soared for every night your father sat with me and held my hand and read to me. In truth, I dreaded my recovery, for I knew that once my condition had improved, Phinny would be leaving me."

I fell into a deep depression after Phinny's relocation to Inlandia. I couldn't bring myself to get out of bed to attend the scheduled tutorial sessions in Wergense – or even to help Father and Elkah with the clearing of the grasslands. Phinny must have sensed the impact his departure had on me, because he made an effort to call and visit regularly. Over time though, the bi-weekly visits became monthly trips, then just random stop-bys on business outings several times a year. But we would still speak just about everyday. During our holo-chats he would confide in me about his problems, about his adjustment to life Inland: how the grasslands had been cleared away and glass towers erected, how he'd obtained a position as an intern on the recently formed Settlement Council. He told me in great detail about debates with his new friends and co-workers, which ranged from political discourse about settlement policy to petty squabbles about who got the offices with the best views. Some of the councilmen had strongly supported the Growth for Humanity Bill pending on Earth, which pushed for more profitable alliances with other alien species at the expense of current Human-Wergen joint ventures. Phinny told me that even though it wasn't his place to do so, he'd passionately defended the Wergen alliance, invoking loyalty, the deep friendship that had developed between our species, the vast amount of knowledge and philosophy that humanity still had to learn from the Wergens.

During these years that Phinny lived in Inlandia, I lived my days waiting for his projection to appear on my holo-monitor. I longed to hear his gentle voice, to laugh at his self-deprecating humor. These chats became more difficult to schedule, however, as the grubber infestations increased. It seemed that every few days the evacuation sirens blared and full-blown laserfire blasted on the outskirts of Argenta.

At the time, a personal matter also concerned me. My body ached to tether, but being isolated from my own kind made this impossible. By then – although I had not discussed it with Father or Elkah – I had already made my decision. I would not tether. More than anything, I wanted to commit myself to the person I cared for more than anyone else in the universe. I wanted to spend my life – in the way that humans share their lives – with Phinny.

Phinny knew about my dilemma; I had confided in him about my need to tether, but not about the decision I had made. During one of his unexpected visits, we took our familiar walk together. A bioelectrical field – quite effective at the time – kept the trail and the overlook clear of grubbers. During this walk, I confessed my intentions.

"I don't plan to tether," I said to him.

"You're just saying that because of your circumstances. I'm sure that if there were others of your kind among us you'd feel differently."

"Maybe I'll just get 'married,'" I said playfully. "I've practically lived my life like a human anyway. After reading up on it, I must say, Phinny, there's something quite intriguing about the marriage ritual."

"When do I get to read the book on Wergen mating customs?"

"Phinny, you *know* we wouldn't write about such things..." But when I saw his warm smile I realized he'd just been teasing.

"I know, I know," he said, holding his hands up as if surrendering. "Shim, I have something in mind." And it was at that moment – I don't know what gave it away, really – that it finally dawned on me: Phinny had been planning to 'propose' to me. I tried then – as I had on so many prior occasions – to imagine our lives together once we formally committed to each other. Human marriage was such a pale shadow of tethering. But if it was with Phinny, with my sweet Phinny, it would suffice.

"Why Phineas Crest, I can't imagine what it might be," I said, mimicking his teasing tone. Then I spoke seriously. "Thank you, Phinny. Thank you for always being there for me." I kissed him on the cheek.

He hugged me, and I felt a buzz surge through my body.

"Phinny!" a familiar voice shouted. Father and Elkah lumbered toward us.

Phinny took a step backward, a look of horror etched across his face. In hindsight, I suppose I should have realized that he would react this way, never having seen this stage of encorporation before.

Father plodded on four legs, his and Elkah's. Elkah's left arm protruded from Father's midsection. Their two torsos were pressed so tightly together that Elkah's left side melded into Father's right side. Another sign that Father had established dominance was that Elkah's head had disappeared within his, save for her right ear, which still remained visible. In several months, all traces of her body would vanish.

"Don't be afraid, Phinny," Father said, skittering towards us, a magnificent tumbleweed of extremities. "It's still us."

Phinny stood silently, his mouth agape, his eyes bulging.

Father chattered away for a long time while Phinny gawked. Finally, I grabbed Phinny's arm and gently led him away.

"So *that's* encorporation!" he said. "But...Elkah?"

"She'll be encorporated completely within Father. Like my mother. Oh, some of Elkah's skills and random memories will survive. And when encorporation is complete, Father – the new Father – will be impregnated with a brood."

"That's how your people...?"

"Phinny, I can't believe you didn't know. You've been seeing this with your own eyes for years." I placed my hand on his shoulder. He flinched.

"I've never heard of anything more horrific. Wergen females die when they mate?"

"Not necessarily. The dominant partner – male or female – encorporates the weaker one and then propagates. Father's genetic dominance was determined long ago when he and Elkah first tethered. In the same way, my genotype is such that I would surely be dominant if I ever tethered."

"I see," he said. Wrinkled lines formed across his forehead. He folded his arms across his chest and walked a few strides ahead of me. "Poor Elkah."

"It's part of nature, Phinny. Part of who we are. Trust me, Elkah looked forward to the day when she could pass on her best qualities

to Father, when she could provide the raw materials necessary for the birthing of a healthy brood."

He said nothing for a long while. During this interminable silence I cursed Father's unbelievably poor timing. His appearance had upset Phinny just at the moment when he was about to 'propose' to me, I was sure of it.

"Phinny, what were you going to ask me?" I finally said, breaking the silence.

He shook his head slowly. "Encorporation. I'm surprised Aunt Zooey didn't tell me about it, or that it hasn't appeared in the xenobiology literature."

"You know it's something we don't talk about. It's very...personal to us. So much so that it's an express condition of the Joint Venture Agreement that humans not write about it or discuss it."

He smiled now, that wide angelic smile that could light up all of Langalana. "Nature is marvelous, wondrous, isn't it?"

I exhaled loudly and returned his smile. Phinny was so gentle, so broad-minded. Of course he understood. Of course he accepted our ways.

"Tomorrow," he said, "I want you to wait for me at our special place."

"Oh?" I felt weightless. "Whatever it is, can't you tell me now?"

"No, no." He shook his head and smiled bashfully.

"Please, Phinny?"

"Don't make me ruin it!"

He squeezed my hands and kissed them. "My dear loyal, Shim. I have so much I've wanted to tell you. *Tomorrow*."

"Tomorrow, then," I said.

I arrived at the overlook almost an hour early, dressed in the shimmering golden robes that Phinny had purchased for me in Inlandia. I brought blankets and sat down in the same spot where I had first begun Phinny's lessons in Wergenese. In my mind's eye, a ghostly version of that rambunctious boy from long ago sat on the blanket next to me, concentrating intensely then jumping to his feet to toss a rock into the ocean.

From the position of the sun, I could see that Phinny had scheduled this moment to coincide perfectly with the sunset.

Where would we live? Phinny had mentioned the spaciousness of his Inlandian apartment. But we had not spoken about children. Although biological procreation could never happen, Phinny had often mentioned the numerous orphaned children left behind by pilgrims killed by the grubber locusts.

I heard the rustling blades of grass and turned around. Phinny stood there. His face glowed with joy to see me; his long yellow fibers ruffled in the ocean breeze. I rose to my feet and he came to me, held my outstretched hands in his. My entire body tingled; I felt incandescent.

"This is my gift to you, Shim," he said, his voice hoarse with emotion.

How many times had I dreamt of this moment?

And how many times in the hundred years since have I relived that moment, a moment forever preserved in my synaptic amber.

He released my hands and swept his arm backwards as if clearing a messy table, as if avoiding a charging grubber.

I followed the direction of his hand, which pointed to the grasslands behind him, to the squat silhouette of a male figure. A figure unmistakably Wergen. He stepped toward us, emerging into the light of dusk.

"Remember when we were children, when Aunt Zooey took your cell samples?" Phinny said. "I transmitted your samples to the

Northern Continent. They ran the normal genetic tests and found a perfect match. When the last human starship arrived, I arranged... Well, it doesn't matter. Shim, this is Korte. Korte, Shim."

Confusion overwhelmed me. Phinny's words initially registered as gibberish. But as their meaning sank in, a wave of vertigo caused me to stagger sideways and backwards.

The Wergen knelt and bowed his head. "A profound honor, Lady Shimera."

I turned and bolted into the grasslands as quickly as my legs would carry me, dashing through the chest-high blades into denser brush that rose higher and higher over my head.

"Shim! What's wrong?" Phinny called out behind me.

Running blindly through the fields I heard Phinny's voice become fainter and fainter.

"Shim! Shim!"

I lost all sense of time racing through the grasslands, the blades' gentle fur brushing against my skin. Had seconds passed? Hours? I dropped to my knees and heaved suffocating sobs. My breathing canal begged for oxygen but my body shuddered with each spastic sob. I rolled to the ground and hugged my knees. What had happened? I couldn't understand what had happened. Rocking myself, I wept uncontrollably.

When I finally opened my eyes, the twilight had faded and the stars had blinked on. Occasionally I heard a buzzer whiz over my head and voices calling out my name. But I only wanted the grubbers to appear and end my agony, to seize me in their mandibles and mercifully rip me to shreds.

A knock on the door of my room woke me up the next morning. Sitting up, I looked around and found myself in my hearth. A dream. Yes, it had all been a horrific dream.

Phinny entered. And all at once I knew that yesterday had really happened. His disheveled appearance and the creased semi-circles under his eyes suggested that he had been part of the search party.

"Shim. What happened? Why did you run away like that?" He sat beside me on the edge of my bed. "Don't you know that the grubbers are everywhere now? It's a miracle we found you in one piece."

I glared at him.

"I thought you'd be happy. Korte is a perfect genetic match; he'll make an exceptional tethering mate."

My eyes brimmed with angry tears.

"What is it?"

"Oh, Phinny, you idiot. Don't you realize that I'm in love with you?" I said, the words finally pouring out of me. "That I've been in love with you from the first day we met? That you mean everything to me, that I can't imagine a life without you?" The tears stung my eyes. "I couldn't care less about tethering."

He seemed stunned. "Shim...I understand," he said. "You're Wergen. Of course you love me."

"No, you don't understand. You don't understand at all. This goes beyond that. I don't love you because you're human. I love you...because you're you!"

He shook his head. "How can you say that? You know that every Wergen feels that way about every human." His face filled with unmistakable pity.

"I don't feel this way about any other human!"

"That's because you've spent more time with me than you have with anyone else. It's only natural that you would have a stronger attraction toward me."



"Your kindness, your humor, your generosity, those are the things that I love...not your beauty."

"Shim..."

"How can I convince you?" I clutched his hands. "How can I make you understand that what I feel for you...It's real. *I swear it.*"

"On a rational level, you have to know that this just isn't true. You're too intelligent not to realize that the biological impulse that drives your species to be attracted to mine...It's affecting you."

"Fine." I let go of his hands and crossed my arms. "So you've known how I felt about you all these years? It must have provided you with such amusement."

"Shim, I need you to understand," he said. He gently ran his hand across my cheek.

I slapped his hand away. "Don't you dare touch me!"

"You're like a dear sister to me..." he said, his voice cracking.

"Leave!" I jumped out of bed and shoved him.

"Shim..." He hung his head and walked toward the door.

"Don't you care that the very sight of you tortures me? That your touch is agony to me? You're a monster!"

"You have to understand..." He turned and grabbed my shoulders.

"Get out! Get out!" I slapped him hard. He took a few steps back, his hand over his red cheek, and I slammed the door in his face.

"Leave me alone! I don't ever want to see you again. Do you hear me? Let me live my life in peace." But even as I said the words, I longed for him to break down the door, to take me in his arms and beg my forgiveness, to kiss me and hold me tight, and tether with me in the fleeting, short-lived way of his people, were it possible. My back to the door, I slid to the floor and stifled the sobs with my hands. After several interminable seconds, I heard him retreat, his footsteps like daggers in my hearts.

"Don't look at me that way, Emissary," I say. The look of pity – even after all these years – still stings. "It wasn't easy, but I eventually got over your father."

The Emissary nods his head slowly.

"I redirected my energies towards...more productive endeavors. I taught classes in Wergene to thousands of arriving humans. And decades later, I turned my attention to politics. I traveled to Inlandia every month and sat on the Settlement Council as Argenta's elected representative. And eventually, with the development of spaceplanes and other forms of intercontinental travel, the World Council was established. Remarkably – even though I remained untethered – my people selected me to serve as Langalana's Wergen Ambassadrix.

"My feelings for your father were dead and buried long, long ago. The way we'd left things, the truth is I never thought I'd see him again."

Against the advice of my military advisers, the remains of Father and my half-siblings, Lyrra, Olsinore, and Vergo were set ablaze on the summit of Piner's Peak. An entire platoon of armed soldiers surrounded the procession, on the lookout for grubbers. Blue-tinted snow fell around us in sheets, forming a covering that made the grasslands appear tired and aged. The pyre still smoked – the final words having been spoken – and, out of respect, the humans and Wergens congregated around me to sing a brooding threnody.

That's when I saw him, standing off in the distance, his face covered by a scarf, his yellow tresses blowing in the wind. Ten years later and I recognized him instantly. It seemed like only yesterday since we'd spoken for what I thought was the final time.

When Phinny realized that I'd spotted him, he approached,

accompanied by an obese female human wearing a fur-lined hooded coat.

"Shimera," he said, hugging me. "I'm so sorry about your family."

"Phinny? It's really you! I'd heard that you relocated to Earth."

"Yes, I was near the system when I got word of Olbodoh's passing."

"The grubbers are everywhere, Phinny. *Everywhere.* The swarms now overwhelm our strongest bioelectric force fields. When I found Father and the children...it was too late."

Phinny embraced me again and this time I fell into his arms. After a few seconds, he pulled away and gestured to the pot-bellied female. "Shimera, this is my wife, Lois."

"Your wife?" I shook her hand in the way that humans greet one another, and my hand tingled. How I hated myself in that instant; how I hated that this woman's touch brought me pleasure. "I'm honored," I said.

After we exchanged pleasantries, Phinny whispered something into his wife's ear and she nodded. A Wergen patrolman took Lois's arm to help her with the slippery footing.

Phinny hooked his arm with mine, and I handed my cane to the patrolman. We walked several steps ahead of them, our footsteps crunching in the snow. "Wergen ambassadrix?" he said. "My, my, my. What happened to the farmgirl and teacher I knew?"

"Without distractions, she found she could expand her horizons."

Phinny looked away from me uncomfortably.

This sounded bitterer than I intended so I changed the subject.

"How's Dr Crest?"

"Aunt Zooey died about five years ago. She stayed in Inlandia, convinced to the very end that the solution to the grubber problem lay in engineering. When the locust storm hit."

"We lost so many good people that day. I didn't realize she was one of them."

"Shimera, isn't it time for you to abandon this world? It isn't safe here."

"I can't give up on Langalana, Phinny. I just can't," I said.

"Remember how easy we all thought this was going to be? Simply power up my people's fieldbots and welcome the arriving starships, right?" I shook my head and smiled. "Well, just because things have gotten difficult is no reason to quit. I have responsibilities here."

The snow had intensified as we walked toward the settlement, but I could still make out the Wergen security forces in our perimeter, following with their weapons drawn.

"Shim, about the way we left things all those years ago...I'm sorry. It was wrong not to stay in touch."

I stopped. "Does she love you, Phinny?" I whispered.

He nodded.

"Let me ask you something," I said under my breath with a ferocity that surprised even me. "How do you know?"

"Excuse me?"

"How do you know? How do you know she isn't just physically attracted to you, that she isn't just driven by a biological compulsion to propagate your species, to combine her DNA with yours?"

"Shim..."

"How do you know it's true love?"

Flakes of blue snow hung on his hair, and he looked like he carried a great weight on his shoulders. "I suppose I don't. But I know this much: she doesn't *have* to love me."

His words deflated me. We took a few more steps in silence before I answered. "I've read medical journals about your species' state of 'love': the increased dopamine levels, the heightened neural activity in

the ventral tegmental area of your mammalian brains. It's all chemical, you know. All driven by the evolutionary urge to breed. You look down on us, but I don't think your kind is *capable* of true love."

"I don't look down on you," he said. But he gave me the look again. The look of unmistakable pity.

Lois and the patrolman had caught up to us so we started to walk again. I coughed and cleared my throat. "As I was saying, Phinny, we're not giving up on the grasslands. We'll figure out some way to drive back the grubbers. I have absolute faith in that. Tell me, can you and Lois stay a few days?"

Phinny looked back at his wife who gave a small, near-imperceptible shake of her head. "No, I'm afraid not. We're on our way to visit Lois's parents in the Scornian system. Plus, Lois is pregnant and it's not really safe for us to stay here too long."

"Oh?" I stared at her midsection and tried to recollect my lessons in human procreation.

We stopped in front of the row of hearths of my neighborhood.

"Well, things have certainly changed here," he observed.

"Yes, a lot more Wergens, eh? Can you and Lois come in for a few minutes? Perhaps have a bowl of *chapra*? Or maybe some preserved watermelon? For old time's sake."

He looked at Lois again and this time she rolled her eyes and tilted her head back slightly. I could have sworn that this caused Phinny to take a step backward, as if an invisible tether pulled at him. "No, no, we really have to be going." He placed his hands in mine. "I promise, I'll keep in touch this time."

"That's good," I said. But as I gauged Lois's expression I thought I saw another near-undetectable headshake. And I realized that this would be the last time I would ever see Phinny.

I slowly circle the table again.

"Langalana rejected all of our efforts to tame her, Emissary. We had to evacuate the settlements three sun-cycles ago and relocate here. The grubbers kept multiplying exponentially. We've concluded that they're a form of biospheric antibody, keyed in to our alien DNA. The grasslands became uninhabitable. Then Inlandia fell. The Northern and Western Continents fared no better. Eventually we tried relocating to the frigid peaks of Langalana's highest mountains – but the grubbers followed, scaling the vertical walls' unimaginable heights to pursue us. We even tried constructing new settlements on remote islands, but in time the grubbers homed in on us, swam across the vast oceans to find us. For a few years we thought we'd found a solution when the engineers developed chemical signatures that camouflaged our alien DNA. The grubbers actually stopped attacking and multiplying, then disappeared altogether. One day, however, they suddenly saw past the chemical mask, and the swarming recommenced. Hundreds of thousands of pilgrims have since been killed.

"We have no choice. It's time for us to move on, Emissary. For all of our dreams of settling Langalana – so many starships traveling such vast distances – we're not welcome here. So I've given the order," Shimera said. "The Wergen contingency will be moving out of this system, joining humanity on some other new world. Glitteria, perhaps? That's why you're here, isn't it? To coordinate our relocation to the next human colony?"

The Emissary stands up and clears his throat. "Thank you for telling me about my father's childhood. The truth is, we had a falling out a long time ago and we were never as close as I would have liked... Before he died, my father heard I had business on Langalana. He asked to see me and requested that I seek you out, to give you a message."

"A message?"

He reaches into the inside pocket of his blue uniform jacket and pulls out an envelope. I look at the extended hand and, shivering slightly, take it from him.

The Emissary pauses. "As for the business I have here..."

"Eh?"

"Yes, we'd heard about the decision to move your people." He rubs his hand over his mouth. "I realize that with your displacement to this satellite you may be unaware of recent developments." He hesitates. "I'm here to inform you that the Growth for Humanity Bill finally passed."

"Excuse me?"

"Earth's Council has decided that our most profitable joint ventures with the Wergens are behind us. We've learned a lot from your people, Ambassadrix, for which we're deeply, deeply grateful. But we're now able to produce high-quality bots on par with the best that the Wergens can produce...And the Evollians have offered us new technologies, new opportunities."

"I...I understand." I feel numb. "Well...at least there will be ongoing cultural exchanges between our peoples. We still have much to learn from one another."

"I'm afraid I haven't made myself clear. Our disassociation must be total. You have to understand, Ambassadrix. My people have difficulty coping with the Wergens'...deep, unconditional adoration. I'm afraid that it's brought out the worst in a certain segment of our population. There have been some...abuses...on other colonies. No, I'm afraid that it's not in anyone's interests for our worlds to interact any further." He stands at the window and stares at Langalana. "So many precious resources. What a shame." He turns. "In any event, I really must be going."

I clench my fists. "What about the contracts in place between our people? The Joint Venture Agreements that have been signed?"

The Emissary walks to the door and pauses at the threshold. "I'm sorry. If you wish to file a grievance, I'm sure some financial settlement can be reached."

After a long pause, I answer. "I'm sorry too, Emissary."

"Yes, well...Good luck to you," he replies awkwardly, and nods goodbye.

As he turns the corner and his footsteps fade down the hall, I hold up the yellowed envelope in my hand. I don't need to open it; I know what it says: Phinny loved me. He came to realize over the years that he'd made a terrible mistake not asking me to marry him, that the love that we shared was pure, genuine. But once he'd realized his terrible mistake, circumstances had conspired against him. By then he had responsibilities to Lois and to his son.

Ah, Phinny, I've been over you for so long now. It doesn't matter any more.

I fold the envelope, unopened.

Leaning against the window, I focus intensely on the cold beauty of Langalana. The planet hangs there, so close, so close that I can almost snatch it out of the sky and cradle it in my bosom. I reach for it, but find the glass thick and impenetrable, and the proximity only an illusion.

I sigh and slowly run my hand along my cheek, tracing the crevices between my scales.

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INTERMISSION

STORIES THE SONG by TIM AKERS ILLUSTRATED by RICHARD MARCHAND



The Song is the first thing he hears in the morning; it's the last thing he hears at night. He dreams about it. He's never really heard it.

This goes all the way back to childhood, as far back as he can remember. Lying in the crib, his first steps, first Beggar's Feast, childhood picnics on the Tumbling Green. The Song. It was years before he realized that other people didn't hear it, when he was caught dancing alone in an empty room, and his mother thought he was puppeted. He sat through the priest's examinations, and never mentioned the Song again.

He took to music early, naturally. Easily. He chased the Song through dozens of instruments, through startled teachers and the best academies in the city. He mastered the classics, he re-imagined the solo, the concerto, the orchestra. He gained patrons, he took lovers, he grew older. The Song was always with him, always inside him, always eluding him.

"That's beautiful," William said. He leaned against the doorway and crossed his arms. "Really it is."

Jack stopped playing and sighed. He set the instrument down on its stand. "It's shit."

"It's not, Jack, not at all. You're so hard on yourself." William crossed the room and put a hand on Jack's shoulder. "You really shouldn't."

"Oh, it's not..." Jack waved a hand across the room, then indicated the instrument. "It's not that bad. It's just not what I was hoping. Not what I was hearing, when I thought of it."

"Yes, well. You hear some beautiful things in your head, Jack."

"I hear the most beautiful thing," Jack said quietly. He clicked his teeth together thoughtfully, then patted the hand William had left on his shoulder. "You're kind, but it's really not good enough."

William laughed and walked to the window. In the street below a coghawker called his wares, trailing a crowd of laughing children in his wake.

"You'll do fine, Jack. What's to worry?"

"What's to worry for you, you mean. Nothing for you to do but sit in the audience," Jack said.

"Sit in the audience, yes." William stiffened his back and looked pointedly out the window. "Sit in the audience and pay rent on the hall. And the salaries for the lighting men, the security. The rest of the orchestra. The advertisements. People don't just show up at these things, Jack." He turned around and tilted his head. "Don't think it's nothing for me."

"You certainly know how to put a man at his ease, William. Tell me, do you think as many people would show up if your advertisements didn't say 'Jacksom Tell' in big block at the top?" He smiled grimly, then picked up the instrument once again.

"Jack." William stared for a second and then glanced back out the window. "Anyway, it's money well spent. I have confidence in you, man. You'll do fine."

"Perhaps. But still." Jack set the stoppers on the instrument and gave the main chord a strum.

William looked over. "That's quite a contraption you've got there. Complicated. What is it?"

"It's a janggala rainhorn. They say it takes a hundred years to build and properly tune." He paused to inflate the dronebag, then made a last adjustment to the stoppers and tuning beads along the neck. "I got it from a zeppelin trader out by the Torchlight market. I was very

hopeful this one would be good enough."

"Good enough?" William raised his eyebrows and took a few steps into the room. "And it's not? Good enough?"

Jack sighed and busied himself with the ivory lined stoppers. Really a beautiful instrument. "Oh, it's fine, sure. It's good."

"Yes. But not good enough, right." William crossed his arms. "And the piano I got you on your birthday, say. Is it good enough?"

"Of course, William. You know that's not what I mean."

"Of course. And if the piano isn't, then perhaps that harp from last Beggars? Or that –" he paused and waved his hand dismissively "– gitar. Good enough."

"Will, look." Jack set the rainhorn down and stood up. "It's not a matter of good or great or whatever. I just..." He fumbled for words. The two stared silently at one another across the room.

"Yes, well." William started, then glanced over his shoulder as a shadow momentarily blotted out the sun. He stepped to the window and leaned out.

A goyle had settled onto the roof across the street, and was awkwardly folding up its four wings. The clockwork bird was bigger than a horse but surprisingly thin. Its body looked like a delicate sculpture of wooden bones, like a dream of bird flight rendered in tiny cogs and wire. Its head was long and thin and sharp.

"Damn bird," William hissed. "You know, I think that one's nesting over there. It's always coming by, spoiling the view. Damaging that roof, too. Look, there's a whole pile of broken tile in the street now. Bloody nuisance."

"They're strange, is all. And they sing so well."

"Hardly." William walked briskly to the door and threw on his walking jacket. "I'm going to see if I can raise a constable. Someone should get rid of that beast. I'll be back for dinner, all right?"

He left the room and hammered down the stairs. Jack wandered to the window, then returned to his rainhorn. It was a beautiful instrument, he had to admit. He adjusted the stoppers again, settled the reed into his mouth and started in again on the opening notes of the Song. Maybe, he thought. Just maybe.

The crowd, it roared. Wall of sound, joyous cacophony, thunderous applause. All of that. Jack stood on stage and was disappointed. Even with a reed section and a bank of strings, he hadn't come close. The night before he had driven rehearsal to the point of collapse. This morning, second reed was a wreck, and the man sitting lead on the strings was plucking like a zombie. Jack clenched his jaw and waved to the crowd, then stormed off stage.

"My Jack, sweet Jack, it was tremendous. Tremendous!" William embraced him as he cleared the wings. The crowd roared on.

Jack shrugged his patron off. "Tremendous? That man, the one leading strings. What's his name, Belmont?"

"Belmont? Yes, I believe that's right," William nodded.

"Belmont. Is fired. He'll need to be replaced immediately. Tonight."

"Tonight? Tonight! Jack, you have another performance tomorrow, and twice on Levenday. We can't replace the Head of Strings tonight! Who'll we get?"

"An ape, a dog, a pile of mud, I don't care. But that man must go. He was dangerously late on the third movement, and he couldn't work up the enthusiasm to hit even half the notes!"

"Jack, really...it was marvelous. I'm sure we can work out any wrinkles during the morning practice. Now, go out there and..."

"No. No, Will. Tonight. Or there will be no practice in the morning, no performance tomorrow, nor twice on Levenday. Fire him tonight."

"Jack, you're being unreasonable. Listen to that applause, Jack, they loved it."

"They would love a beanbear banging two rocks together. Fire him or fire me."

And he left. The crowd roared on.

He spent the night drinking and breaking instruments. He cut strings, smashed the smooth wooden shell of the gitar, splintered the dulcimer's neck, bent the rainhorn's pipes and twisted off its delicate stoppers. It was loud and dissonant, music mixed with mayhem and tortured wood.

Jack locked the doors to his suite. Late that night William came home and banged on the door. He yelled, he threatened, he pleaded. Eventually, he went away.

The city was quiet, at least in this district, at this time of night. Out the window Jack could see the high steppes of Torchlight with its broad avenues, topped by the cluster of zeppelin towers and their conning beacons. The distant lights of Runabout and Trilling burned with the cold, hard steadiness of friction lamps. But he was far enough away from the livelier districts for it to be quiet in his room, overlooking the Saddle March. And into the quiet crept the Song, taunting him, haunting him, thrilling him. It stayed just outside his grasp. It was the basis for every composition he had ever essayed, rolling under them and through them like a current of fire, hinted at but never achieved. It was slowly, completely, breaking him apart.

He sat down among the broken piles of his lifetime collection and cried, cried with the honesty and abandon of the thoroughly plastered. He nudged at the debris of the rainhorn, and wondered about the janggala artisan who had made it, thought about impossibly old hands fixing the stoppers, setting the chords, tuning it, over years and years.

Jack felt bad about it, about breaking them all. He apologized to them, blubbing, apologizing to all the artists and craftsmen who had made them, to William and Old Don and his parents who had bought them. It's not your fault, he said, you didn't know. You tried to be good enough. But you weren't, you couldn't be. It's the Song, see. It was just too much for you; too much for me, maybe. Not your fault. I really can't imagine an instrument that could really, perfectly, play that Song. It would be too complicated. Too many notes, too many themes, variations. Chords piled upon chords. And even, even if there were an instrument like that, I don't think I could play it. I don't think any one person could play it. I just can't imagine.

And then he did. Imagine. He swept aside the broken pieces of his collection and got out pen and paper. He started writing, drawing diagrams, taking measurements and calibrating angles. Imagining.

Jack flattened out his rumpled sheet of paper. "This is what I'm talking about," he said, smoothing out the corners with the palm of his hand.

The anansi turned from his complicated table and peered down at the paper. He plucked spectacles from his coat and fixed them to his face. This cogger, Toesh, had come highly recommended to Jack, through certain channels. Still, he couldn't help but feel nervous in the presence of such a strange creature. He looked human enough. Just tall and thin, with taloned fingers and a hump. It was the hump, though, and knowing that under his coat there were a dozen broad spider-like legs, that made Jack nervous.

"You're sure about this?" Toesh asked, running a brightly enameled talon along the edge of the schematic. "This is no small thing."

"Yes, I'm sure. You'll do it?"

"Of course. You have the money, so of course I'll do it." The anansi turned back to his table. Jack watched the hump of the creature's spider arms writhe beneath the carefully tailored coat. "You have the money, yes?"

"Yes, yes." Jack dug the price out of his purse and set it on the desk. William probably wouldn't miss the coins.

The anansi swept the stack of money off the desk and smiled. His mouth was crowded with short, thin teeth, milky white. "All right. Yes, all right indeed. Let's get started, shall we?"

"Now? You want to do this now?"

Toesh shrugged, and the hump on his back writhed sympathetically. "Why not? You have a reason for waiting?"

Jack wasn't entirely sure that it would work, that the road he was about to travel ended properly in the Song. But it was the only road left open to him.

"No. No, of course not. You have your price."

Toesh ducked his head, plucked Jack's rumpled plan from the desk and pinned it to the wall. He drew out a dozen bottles of varicolored powders, oils and pastes and arranged them on the table.

"It shouldn't be that difficult, really. I've created much more complicated cogs. More moving parts, affecting a larger portion of the body." He waved a hand at the schematic and then motioned to Jack. "This? This is nothing. I mean, it's unique, but nothing to worry about." He turned to look at Jack over the top of his glasses. "You see?"

"Yes. Nothing to worry about."

"Good. Now, have a seat while I mix the foetus. It shouldn't be long."

Jack sat down in the front of the workshop and peered out the window. People passed by on the cobbled street, hurrying along or just window shopping. A few of them saw Jack and stared at him with a mixture of curiosity and pity, maybe even fear, before ducking their heads and continuing on down the street. Jack sighed. Behind him, the anansi hummed noisily, the glass pots clanging together as he worked.

"Now, I want you to keep these symbols in mind during the operation. Don't worry about the individual details; your head will take care of that. Just focus on the broad strokes."

Jack ran a finger along the edge of the sandboard. The lines looked like the squirming heart of a draug hive.

"Won't I be asleep? During the operation, I mean." He looked over the table covered with bright, sharp instruments.

"Not asleep. Unconscious, though. More like a trance. You

won't feel a thing, friend. You think you can do that? Keep the symbol at the front of your mind? After all, you keep all those notes in your head, yes?"

Jack looked up sharply. It was the first indication that the anansi had recognized him. But of course he had. Jack was a known man. A talented man.

"Those notes are sounds. And I don't really keep them all in my head. It's more a matter of...feeling them. Hearing them."

"Yes, I'm sure. Same mechanism, either way. Now then..."

Toesh turned back to his table and picked up something flat and silvery, only slightly smaller than the palm of his broad anansi hand. "This is the foetal metal. Specially mixed for your design." He extended his palm toward Jack. "Touch it."

Jack did. It was cold and almost liquid. It shivered at the tip of his finger.

"It will get warmer, slowly, now that I've activated it. Now, we have two points of possible entry. We can go through the mouth, or I can cut directly into your chest. I'm going to have to make some small incisions in the chest and shoulder anyway," he said, tapping Jack sharply in several places. "But if we insert there we'll need a...bigger hole." He smiled. "It could lead to significant scarring. It's your choice."

Jack touched his throat and grimaced. "When you say scarring—"

"Significant scarring," Toesh said.

Jack paused. Well, he decided, I suppose this is it. "Mouth is fine. Should I lie down or something?"

"It's better if you remain seated. Allows the foetus to settle properly before it begins its work. Here. Look at the symbol, fix it in your mind. You have it? Good. Now drink this tincture and close your eyes. Good. Here goes the metal."

It was hot and tasted like storm clouds, like crashing thunder down his throat. His chest hammered, and then there was blackness.

Jack closed the door to the manor and shut his eyes. It was absolutely quiet, except for the Song drifting in his head. He breathed in deeply and listened to the nothing. The air really was much cleaner here, up and away from the city. Jack locked the door and dragged his bag through the foyer.

The trip up to William's summer home hadn't taken as long as Jack thought it might, but certainly longer than he liked spending on the road. Most of that time had been spent looping around north of the city to avoid the Stacks slums, then waiting for the ferry to cross the river. Once he was in the mountains, it had been pleasant enough, but he was dusty and completely out of breath. His chest hurt, and his shoulder was throbbing.

In the main room, the furniture was covered for the season and the water pump had been allowed to wind completely down. Jack struggled to get the pump working so he could take a proper bath, but finally gave up and contented himself with a cold splash in the face. He soaked his feet in the cistern until night fell, then trundled upstairs to light some candles. Unpacking his bag, he took the bottle he'd brought, retrieved a glass from the bar, and went out front.

The veranda was the real showpiece of the manor home. In the summers, William would throw the most fantastic parties for all the aristocrats who had fled to the mountains for the season. The three tiers of the veranda would bustle with gold cloth and torchlight, the food imported from all over the world. And the music. Always the most exquisite music.

Of course, there was the view. Stretched out below was all of Veridon city, like a great whale beached on the shores of the mighty river Reine. At this distance the metropolis looked like a delicate, jeweled shawl cast from the shoulders of some giant. The canals sparkled in the moonlight, the friction lamps glittering throughout the fabric of stonework walls and slate roofs. Yes, from here Veridon was beautiful and far away.

And somewhere down there, Jack thought, William is wondering where the hell I am. The audience is probably getting restless. I wonder if they fired that hound, Belmont. No matter. I'll never need an orchestra again.

Jack cracked the seal on the bottle of wine that he'd brought with him and poured a glass. The first chills of night shivered through Jack's bones. Maybe it was nerves.

Or maybe it was excitement. Anticipation. Jack grinned. All his life, and he was about ready. It deserved the proper setting. Jack raised his glass to distant Veridon, to the clean marble plateau of the veranda, to the sluggish length of the Reine and the abundant forests between and laughed out loud. This, this was a proper setting. He drank. The wine was smoky and red, the spices clinging to his teeth and filling his chest with fire. Jack laughed, he laughed and he threw his arms wide to the deepening night sky. He finished the glass and poured another.

Warm now with wine and honest joy, Jack slowly unbuttoned his shirt. His shoulder was still stiff, but no matter. He'd dragged a floor mirror out from one of the bedrooms to see the mutilation. The shirt snagged as he pulled it off, and he very carefully disentangled it from the complication of his chest. He dropped the shirt to the floor and turned to face the mirror. He drank more wine.

His right pectoral was gone, replaced by the fanned pipes of an organ. The metal poked tentatively through, the skin shiny and red at the seams. No fewer than twenty pipes, arranged in four ranks, climbed up his chest and sprouted from his shoulder. These were only the visible components. Clusters of pipes, reeds and flues dug through his chest and arms. The steady churning of cogs could be seen under the skin of his right arm, where the anansi had replaced the musculature with clockwork, to make room for the instrument. The perfect instrument.

Jack breathed in deeply once again, and heard the background whisper of music drawing through his new organ. Whatever the doctor had done to bolster his remaining lung, Jack couldn't tell the loss.

As for the new organ, well, he was looking forward to using it. He fingered the bright edge of the pipes, the glistening seam between skin and metal. The Song, he thought, was before him. It was in his grasp.

Jack finished his wine, then set down the glass and covered the mirror with a sheet. Closing his eyes, Jack fluttered the dozens of stoppers inside his chest and whispered out a tune more complicated than any he could perform. Testing the scales, feeling his way around the edges of possibility, learning the limits of the instrument. He could find none.

The instrument Jack had designed was too complicated to be played, obviously. If it was meant to form the Song (and it was, it would, he could feel it) then there was no way any ten fingers, two hands and a mouth could play it. But now, now that he wasn't playing the instrument, now that Jack was the instrument. Now. The Song.

Jack opened his eyes and spread his arms to the gem-sparkling

city and sang, for the first time, for the only time, the Song. It was perfect. It was forever. It was cascading rhythm and divine form. It was the music of love, of glory, of summer days and perfect winter mornings, it was your lover warm in your arms, it was honey, it was liquor, it was a thundercloud of sound and a kiss of absolute beauty. It lasted forever, it was over in a breath.

It was the Song, haunting since childhood, laid out before him. Perfect.

When he finished, Jack collapsed into a chair. He felt wrung dry, like lightning had gone through him. He closed his eyes and smiled up into the star littered sky.

There was a massive crunching sound, and Jack looked over his shoulder to see the blackest shape he had ever seen. It was settling onto the roof of the manor. He started to his feet, knocking the wine glass onto the veranda floor. The glass shattered with a loud pop. Jack backed into the veranda's railing.

"The song is mine," the shape whispered in a voice like summer breeze. "I've been looking. I thought you might have it."

Jack sat down on the railing. He thought about vaulting over it and running down the hill.

"What? What are you saying?" Jack fumbled for a lamp. He found one by his feet, where it had rolled when he upset the table. He twisted up the element and the lamp whirled to life.

Above him, on the roof of the house, was a goyle. The same goyle, perhaps, that had perched outside his apartment window for the last three months. Its wings shuffled and scissored around its body, its intricate heart fluttering restlessly as if it were uncomfortable on its perch. Its head, as long as Jack was tall and impossibly complicated, bobbed impatiently in the steady light. The goyle hopped down onto the veranda, crushing several chairs into splinters. Jack's stomach flipped and his knees unhinged.

"The song, my song. I've missed it."

Jack blinked stupidly at this beast, this monster with the delicate voice. "I don't understand," he said. "How do you know?"

The goyle spread its four wings, blotting out the moon. Its chest... articulated, like a puzzlebox solving itself. Music started from inside it. And then a Song.

It shattered Jack. It shamed him, to think that his frail shadow of a Song was anything but noise, to have spent so much of his life toiling to create this bauble, this cheap copy of a whisper. To have, seconds ago, worshipped the rude filth that had come from his chest. His simple, crude instrument. He was elevated and crushed, in one aurally perfect blow.

He slid to the floor when it was over. His hand rested in the glittering pool of the broken wine glass. Blood beaded up from a dozen cuts.

"How... What was that?"

"Song. My song. You have my childsong." The goyle bobbed its head, and waited.

"What do I do?" he asked.

"Close your eyes, man, and sing to me."

Jack stood up and, because he couldn't think of anything else to do, spread his arms as if to embrace the monster. He began to sing the Song he knew. He felt something cold touch his eyes, his ears, his tongue, the Song.

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Palestina

Here comes Itzik the *Meshugga*, Crazy Itzik, ambling straight down the middle of the main dirt road through the refugee camp. Palestina sits on a rusted metal drum, her chin cupped in both hands, and watches him. Itzik is closing in on forty and his mane of red hair, for which he used to be known as the Jinji, is starting to turn gray. Gray from guilt, some say, and indeed ever since Palestina can remember the crazy man has worn the heavy black garb of the ultra-Orthodox Jew. Well, the camp is full of these *hozrim b'tshuva*, these penitents, all of them beseeching God to forgive them for trying to pre-empt the Messiah. Itzik stands out only because he is so eccentric, talking and singing to himself at full volume, sometimes even holding loud arguments with the empty air. "Rabbi Hanina says to pray for the authorities, for without them, men would eat each other alive," he chants in a singsong Talmudic baritone. Palestina wonders who Itzik thinks is listening: the dead? Almighty God? Most often his only audience is the soldiers who guard the camp. Depending on their

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mood they laugh and give him leftover rations, or curse and shower him with kicks and blows, especially Fouad the Syrian. Whatever is forthcoming from them Itzik always accepts it obsequiously. "Thank you, *ya effendi*... Thank you, *ya effendi*..." Palestina isn't sure which aspect of this performance is most revolting. Fortunately the only soldier around now is a pale, lanky young man in the olive drab of the Russian military advisors, who is watching Itzik with a quizzical disgust that is like a mirror of Palestina's own feelings.

Suddenly restless, Palestina gets up and walks off down a garbage-strewn alley. Tin-roofed shacks loom up on either side. Some of the prefabricated asbestos walls still bear in fading Hebrew letters the word *ma'abara*, transit camp. But there is nothing transient about this place, as far as Palestina can tell. She has been here all her life. Ma tells her that she was born in Tel Aviv, but Palestina has no memory of that doomed city. Were it not for her mother's stories, and the occasional French or English schoolbook brought in by the bluehelmets, and one other thing, Palestina could easily imagine

that this collection of two hundred hovels fenced off on every side with a double row of electrified barbed wire is the whole universe.

The other thing comes into view as Palestina turns the corner round the Feigs' scraggly vegetable garden, grown from sand and human waste. On some days it is a hint merely, but today the cobalt triangle of sea some two hundred yards off is clearly visible beyond the sand dunes. If Palestina holds her hand out at arms' length she can block her view of the Mediterranean completely, but of course she'd rather climb atop the rubbish heap, ignoring the rich stench and the flies, and see it swell to occupy more than a quarter of the horizon.

The view is always worth the discomfort. On some days it's blank as a winter sky, but today the water is full of ships. Big gray destroyers with ugly tubular protrusions capable of flattening the camp in one burst of fury, smaller darting shapes that draw white wakes behind them. No fishing smacks out today: Palestina is sorry to note their absence. She balances awkwardly atop a crumbled particleboard wall at the top of the midden. She can never seem to get her balance as

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easily as she used to, in her willowy tomboy days before her breasts started to grow out. Palestina can't think of them as a pair of fawns, like it says in the Song of Songs; they feel like ugly weighty lumps to her, and they attract all sorts of unwanted attention from the camp boys and, much worse, the guards. Still, Palestina can't give up her afternoons alone here, at the top of the world, though she stands out like a bombing target.

Palestina likes to feel the sea breeze against her closed eyelids, stretch her arms out and imagine she is flying over the whitecaps, flashing past the blue miles to Cyprus or Turkey or far-off Greece and Italy, or past them all to America. But today the wind is not cooperating. There is an onshore breeze bathing her in the stench of dust and rotting garbage from the camp, and the noisy shrieks of the brats who swarm the place thick as flies are loud in her ears. Palestina thinks she must be the lone only child in the whole of Herzliya Camp. The religious penitents like to go around telling people they are fulfilling God's commandment to be fruitful and multiply (though not Crazy Itzik, no woman is desperate enough to have him), and from the rest there's a lot of rhetoric about not giving Nasser an easy victory. But Ma says it's all a lot of nonsense, it's just that people have nothing better to do but get laid.

"Not you though, Tina," Naomi Ben-Zion always says, grabbing her daughter by the shoulders and trapping her with a dark-eyed gaze. "You're getting out. You work at your studies and Dr Larssen says he can get you a scholarship for Uppsala, or even for Stockholm." Dr Larssen is the plump, sandy-haired head of the small UNICEF contingent in the camp. He likes to tousle the smaller kids' hair and hand them little Hershey bars, for which the parents call him *malakh*, angel. But Palestina doesn't trust those iceberg-blue eyes of his. If he took off his stupid round glasses and lost a few pounds he could be a real S.S. *malakh hamavet*, Angel of Death. Everybody fawns on the bluehelmets, but no exit visas have been issued for three years, since the United Arab Republic was proclaimed and scrawny Syrian guards came to join the fat greasy Egyptians in tormenting the camp inmates. Recently dark-eyed chubby Yemenis have joined the fun. As well choose between cholera and plague, says Ma, quoting the old Yiddish proverb.

With a resigned sigh Palestina turns her gaze back to her true kingdom, the camp. From her vantage point she can all too easily see the Republic's flag drooping on its aluminum pole by the camp gate, its bold red, white and black stripes dulled by the omnipresent dust. Only the row of three green stars in the central white band looks crisp and fresh; the middle one always makes Palestina think of an extra eye, watching her unblinkingly. It gives her goose bumps. But the miserable gravel square beneath the flag gives everyone the willies anyway, since it is the assembly point for the camp, and assemblies are almost always called for purposes of collective punishment. Like when they hanged poor Motti, the skinny freckled kid with the glasses, for hiding a rusty pocketknife under his bed. He screamed and fought the whole time, and afterwards his body twitched horribly for what seemed like an hour while they were all made to file past in silence. It didn't help that he had made a pass at Palestina a few months before and she had been avoiding him ever since. She couldn't keep solid food down for two days after that.

As Palestina stands gazing down at the square, there is a crunching sound of tires on gravel. A door slams. Men's voices in Arabic, the Egyptian dialect. High officers, then. The wind carries their words to Palestina as clearly as if she was in the assembly



square with them. Although she cannot see their faces she instinctively goes into a crouch and scuttles down from the summit of the garbage midden. Like all the children of the camp Palestina can understand the soldiers' language well enough, though she pretends not to speak more than a few words and in truth she can neither read nor write it. But frustratingly the voices sink to a mutter just as she gets into a good position for eavesdropping. Then the wind shifts again. "...trouble in town," one man says, his tone authoritative. "We had to shoot ten. Can't have any nonsense from the *fellahin*, not with the situation like it is."

"Men or women?" someone asks.

"Oh, men only. Can't afford to waste a good set of tits, not with the situation like it is," says a third soldier, imitating the officer's voice. This is met with a burst of raucous male laughter. Palestina shivers and wraps her too-large scarlet sweater tighter around her body.

A new voice joins in in awkwardly accented Arabic, and Palestina senses the soldiers stiffening into formality. "Any sign of hostile action?"

"Not yet, Comrade Advisor," says the officer. Silence from the others, he must be the only one authorized to speak to the foreign guest, who grunts in response, then says, "Keeping low to the ground, the Americans and their friends. But you'd better go easy on the, ah, the villagers. You don't want a fifth column at your back when things get hot."

There's a smirk in the officer's voice when he responds. "It's just pacification, Comrade Advisor. Like what Stalin did to the kulaks."

There's a silence broken only by a scuffing sound; Palestina pictures the Russian looking at the ground as he kicks up dust with his thick boots. Sure enough a whitish cloud drifts her way and she has to hold her breath to keep from sneezing. At last there's a mutter of voices moving away and she lets her breath out slowly. Then she stands up and massages the cramp out of her thighs before slinking off with her hands jammed deep into her pockets, the pockets of the pair of dull gray men's trousers that were her great find at the last clothing distribution. Should she tell Ma, that's the question she asks the slime-coated ground at her feet. Everybody already knows there's trouble brewing between the Republic and the Hashemites; it's not clear the conversation she has just overheard adds anything. And as for the 'pacification', it's a rare night the camp doesn't awake to the sound of shooting in the distance. All that'll happen if she tells is, she'll catch hell from Ma for needlessly putting herself in danger. And Ma will be right.

Suddenly something hard clamps itself around Palestina's midriff. She opens her mouth to scream, but there's a hand covering it, and she's being dragged backward toward the infirmary, a slightly larger than average shack which is padlocked except at sick call on Tuesday and Friday mornings. Palestina kicks frantically, her feet barely scraping the ground, as she tries to bite the hand over her mouth. It's one of the filthy inmate boys, she just knows it, he'll put her in the family way and then it's bye-bye Uppsala. Then she notices blurrily the khaki cuff that falls neatly over the wrist and goes limp with fear. It's the Russian advisor, she was noticed after all, the best she can hope for is a public flogging. But if he's dragging her around like this it must mean he wants the same thing as the inmate boys... The only mercy is there's no one in sight to witness her humiliation.

The pressure on Palestina's waist eases and there's a rattling as the Russian unlocks the infirmary door. But she's too numb to make a

break for it. Inside, the shack is cool and dark, the air thick with the odor of rubbing alcohol and codeine, and a sweetish smell of diseased flesh; just last Thursday they buried Mr Kipnes, after Dr Friedman's emergency amputation went wrong. The elderly *yekke* physician has deep pouches under his eyes, and Palestina has an idea he would kill himself in a minute if he didn't have the entire camp depending on him. To get clean away from Hitler only to end up here... Palestina can only imagine what that must feel like. She's never really had the sensation of hope raised, then destroyed.

A sharp impact on her stomach takes Palestina's breath away and sends her reeling backward onto a cot. So that's what he wants, of course it is. But a stray beam of sunlight piercing the shutters catches the Russian across his moon face, and Palestina sees him wincing at the rusty squeak the bedsprings make under her weight. Which must mean he's afraid of being overheard, but how can that be? He's the king of this dungheap, even the Egyptian officer wouldn't dare cross him. Nonetheless his fear is real. Palestina watches in amazement as he raises a shaky forefinger to his lips. Well, maybe he's just embarrassed. Then he scuttles over and sits down by her side on the cot, which groans as if it's about to break. Palestina studies him by the light of that same yellow sunbeam, now deepening toward orange as the afternoon ages. His round face is picked out here and there by acne scars, but the features are pleasant enough: a narrow nose over thin lips, eyes wet and dark as a mud puddle, disheveled dirty-blond hair. It crosses her mind that without the uniform and with a few less pounds on his already scrawny frame, the Russian could easily fit in among the camp inmates. She tries to guess how old he is. Not much stubble on his face. Seems he's not much older than her. Which is a strange thought, since he's been all over the world and she's never left the camp.

All her thoughts are shattered when he starts whispering. For a few seconds she's too stunned to take in the actual words. This Russian officer is speaking to her in Yiddish, the same fractured and agonized tongue Ma is always scolding her in! His breath stinks of vodka and sour garlic. She forces herself to concentrate on what he's saying.

"— clear out the camp. They've got orders, I've seen them myself." When she says nothing he seizes her sweaty hands in his cold ones. The fingernails are ragged but clean. "Don't you speak Yiddish?" he asks, raising his voice in desperation.

"Of course I do. Keep your voice down, you idiot," Palestina hisses. The Russian — the Russian Jew — drops his eyes, abashed. Palestina wonders what his name is, but is too afraid to ask.

"Listen," he starts again, his lips barely moving, "you've got to help me. Contact the resistance —"

Palestina snorts. "There is no resistance, not in this camp. They flog you for having a sharpened spoon handle to cut your food."

He drops her hand to make an abortive gesture. "But the Hagana—"

"There is no Hagana. You are KGB, you've seen this camp, and you don't realize they crushed us long ago?" Palestina hears what she's saying and all the blood drains out of her face. He's KGB. They don't have Yiddish-speaking officers? He could drop his trousers for her and let her see his circumcision, it wouldn't make any difference. If he's a Jew he's a traitor. Like a kapo sent into their midst. And she fell for it. One word of *mamaloshen* and she melted into his arms. She could kill herself but she needn't bother, he'll do it for her once he's pumped her for information. Better pretend she hasn't caught on, though: put off the moment of truth as long as possible. How she despises herself.

The KGB man seemingly hasn't noticed anything. He's biting his



thumbnail, hard enough to draw a tiny drop of blood, and still going on about the Hagana. She stares at him a moment as an idea takes shape in her mind. Well, why not? What has she got to lose?

"There is one ex-Hagana man here," she says slowly. He looks up at her with wide eyes, sweat matting his hair. He's a great actor, she'll give him that. He seizes her hands again and holds on as if she's rescuing him from drowning. "Yes," she says, "not just Hagana, but *Palmach*. Actually he was the commander." The KGB man's eyes go wider than ever at the mention of the famed elite unit of the Jewish underground army. Palestina feels like laughing in his face. Will he be surprised when he meets

Crazy Itzik. She can't wait to see the look on their faces, both of them.

But the Russian says they have to wait till after dark. That means at least an hour trapped in this little space with him. Palestina stays sitting on the cot and watches him as he paces up and down, making surprisingly little noise in his heavy boots. She's annoyed to find herself examining him more carefully than ever. Standing, he's a skinny little thing, the sort of boy all the Jewish mamas in the camp instinctively want to ply with whatever edibles are at hand. He keeps making jerky little motions with his hands, but of course Palestina doesn't know him well enough to guess whether this is habitual with him or a result of the circumstances. Probably the latter; what kind of KGB man walks around twitching worse than Crazy Itzik himself? The Arabs would have him for breakfast if they saw him acting like that. Palestina doesn't care, she just wants him to go take his *provokatzia* some place else.

But for the moment she's stuck here, forced to listen to him talk about how his father fell in the Great Patriotic War while he and his mother somehow survived the Siege of Leningrad, nine hundred days eating boiled shoe leather and filth. That would explain his scrawniness, if it's true. After the war ended he managed to get good grades in school and wanted to study engineering, but the university already had too many students with a J in the nationality blank of the internal passport, so he figured fuck 'em, he'd join the KGB so they'd all have to be afraid of him. How was he to know he had a gift for languages and they'd put him in foreign intelligence — and send him here, of all places? To help the dirty stinking Arabs with their insufferable arrogance. He doesn't mind so much scouting out Hashemite positions, all those Iraqis and their American friends dug in around Kafr Qasem and the ruins of Kfar Saba. But why in hell did they have to send him to Herzliya Camp, of all places? He feels like a kapo, for God's sake. Palestina jumps a little when she hears him express her own thought, but he doesn't seem to notice. He's too busy putting his whole self into his act like a Stanislavsky Method actor. Or maybe he's really pouring his heart out to her. Once again she's in doubt.

But even if he is for real, he can't possibly bring her anything but trouble. For the twentieth time she warns herself not to take pity on him, and above all not to respond to his sob story with her own miserable biography. She wonders uneasily if he's been talking to Abu Jamal, the sadistic Cairene bastard of a camp commandant, who could certainly have told him that she was two when she lost her father, who fell when the Egyptians overran Ashdod Junction in the battle that sealed the fate of Tel Aviv. So he comes to her and claims he lost his tankist father at Kursk. What an instant bond of sympathy! But on second thought she's not really sure that Abu Jamal is capable of such subtlety. Beating wayward inmates on the soles of their feet with a thick cable and replacing the hanging rope

with piano wire, that's more his style.

At last the KGB man's monologue runs down, and he glances at Palestina as if noticing for the first time that she hasn't opened her mouth at all. He makes an abortive gesture in her direction, then strides over to the window and cautiously pushes the shutters aside. The sunbeam long ago sank out of sight and the infirmary is now in darkness. There's almost no noise from outside, but then everyone is probably lining up for dinner, which is invariably a porridge made from the corn meal that comes in 25-kilo burlap sacks with 'UN' stenciled on the side. It's been over a year since Palestina has seen a fresh vegetable or an unspoiled piece of meat. She's old enough to remember when they got lavish shipments from the Joint, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. Mountains of canned and packaged goods would arrive on trucks from the rebuilt Jaffa Port. In those days they had white flour, condensed milk, canned beef and chicken, sliced pineapple all the way from Hawaii, you name it! Palestina remembers with special fondness a shipment of dried apricots, even though they gave her diarrhea. Of course all that came to an abrupt end when Nasser seized power and the Republic was proclaimed. Palestina feels sorry for the toddlers too young to remember the former days of luxury.

The Russian suddenly pivots and gestures toward the door. With a mental shrug Palestina gets to her feet. Now's as good a time as any to try for an audience with Crazy Itzik. Like many of the penitents, he doesn't show up for the food distribution because of the immodest mingling of the sexes, not to mention the flagrant disregard for the dietary laws shown by the impious ones who still have not been humbled by divine wrath. Of course the impious ones are thus obliged to contrive ways to feed these religious prima donnas, but there's remarkably little grumbling about the extra trouble and risk involved. Maybe it's because they all secretly suspect the penitents might be right that the double catastrophe of the Forties really was God's judgment on the wayward people of Israel. Ma says it's all so much hogwash but doesn't sound entirely convinced, herself. Sometimes as she gazes out to sea from the top of the trash midden Palestina is sure it's true. God as the Commandant of the Universe, with a million sadistic little rules and regulations and death meted out for the slightest infraction – it makes perfect sense to her.

The KGB man already has the door open a crack and is peering out as Palestina makes her way over to him. She takes her time about it, both to keep the noise down and to torment him a little. So she isn't expecting it when he turns to face her, thrusts his head forward and plants a hard little kiss on her mouth. The vodka and sour garlic stink... she shuts her eyes on a dizzy mix of revulsion and something else, something unnameable. There's no time to sort out her feelings, though, because he's grabbed her hand and is pulling her out the door. They go about five steps and he stops, irresolute. Of course, she's the guide here. She takes the lead as they pass through a warren of alleys and passageways barely wide enough for a man to slide through sideways. They're still holding hands and Palestina is irritated to discover she doesn't totally loathe the feeling, even though his palm is as cold and slippery as the ground near the midden after a rain.

After several minutes of weaving in and out, delighting Palestina with the thought that the Russian will never be able to find his way back on his own, especially as night has now definitely fallen, they arrive in a forsaken area of shacks that were flooded out last winter. Here Crazy Itzik makes his home in an abandoned balsa wood packing case that the penitent, who stands over six feet tall, has to stoop to



enter. That doesn't seem to bother him much, though, since he always seem to be praying, swaying from the hips like a Hasid, never standing up straight. And indeed when Palestina and the KGB man arrive Crazy Itzik is ecstatically rocking back and forth as he *davens* the evening prayers without a prayerbook, thanking God for bringing on day and night, rolling up light before darkness and darkness before light and setting the stars in their places in the Heavens, the better to torment Man. The penitent sees out of the corner of his eye that he has visitors, but does not pause in his devotions, leaving the girl and the secret policeman to shift from foot to foot as they stare at the filthy ground. For some reason Palestina cannot understand they are still holding hands.

At last Crazy Itzik finishes vespers and turns to greet his visitors. "As Abraham welcomed the angels to his tent, I welcome you. *Shalom aleichem*," he says in the slow drawl he uses when not in a manic phase.

"*Aleicha shalom*, Commander Yigal Alon," the Russian replies.

Crazy Itzik lifts a red eyebrow as Palestina swallows a giggle. "You do me an undeserved honor, my friend. I command nothing but dust and cockroaches. Only the King of the Universe may justly demand a Jew's obedience."

"Well said, good sir," the KGB man gravely replies, ignoring the implied challenge to the Republic. Then, letting go of Palestina's hand, he introduces himself as Veniamin Alexandrovich Turetsky and stretches his bitten fingernails toward the penitent, who grasps the extended hand. As they shake Turetsky says, "It's an honor to meet you, Commander Alon. But I'm surprised they let you live."

"He who saves a single life, it is as if he had saved an entire universe," Crazy Itzik quotes, cackling like a madman of seventy rather than forty years. "But I'm afraid you are under a misapprehension, good sir. I was never a commander in the army of the apostates, only a deputy commander."

This news seems to startle Turetsky, though Palestina knows well enough what is coming and watches with amusement, her arms wrapped around her body to ward off the night chill. "Then you are Yitzhak Rabin? The same who –"

"Yes, the same," the penitent interrupts. "I do not run from my shame. A Jew killing fellow Jews, that was the bitter fruit of the Zionist heresy!" He raises both his arms theatrically, palms outspread as if to hold up the starry night sky, an Orthodox Jewish Atlas. "May God forgive the stiff-necked people our sins! He sent the Nazis, may their name be blotted out, to chastise us, but we were like the idols that see not and hear not! Even after that warning, the accused Zionists kept on behaving like thieves and usurpers. Only The-Holy-One-Blessed-Be-He may lead the people of Israel back to Zion. So he had to send the sons of Ishmael to chastise his Chosen People, weeping bitter tears as he did so!" The ex-*Palmachnik* drops his hands, his whole body droops and he begins to sob loudly, big tears dripping into his tangled beard, as if in imitation of his Maker. Palestina can't restrain a grin in the safety of the shadows. It's just as she intended. Any second now the Russian will give up in disgust and walk away.

But Turetsky's reaction is strange. He stands perfectly still, studying the penitent through narrowed eyes. At length he says, "All right, Commander, cut the act."

Crazy Itzik freezes. "I beg your pardon?"

The Russian leans forward and taps the *Palmachnik* on the shoulder. "I've been watching you all afternoon. As part of our training, they sent us to a mental hospital where they 'treat' those foolish enough to question the Soviet state. I'm not proud of what I

saw there, believe me, but I know what madness looks like. And I know even better what faking it looks like. So you can give it a rest. You're no crazier than I am. And no more religious, either, I'd be willing to bet."

Crazy Itzik shrugs and sits down on a smaller wooden crate within the large crate that is his home. He gestures sardonically at a broken piece of reinforced concrete in the alley behind Turetsky. "Have a seat, then, and tell me what it is you want."

"To help you, dammit," the Russian says, without budging. Palestina is looking from one man to the other in utter confusion. As she watches, the KGB man unbuttons his shirt pocket, pulls out a sheaf of folded papers and hands it to the seated penitent. Accepting the papers with his left hand, Crazy Itzik reaches into the right pocket of his tattered black coat with his other hand and casually performs a miracle, withdrawing a Zippo lighter worth a month's rations on the camp's black market. The small flame illuminates several pages of densely printed Arabic, which Crazy Itzik proceeds to flip through, with seeming carelessness at first and then more slowly. The second-to-last page gets his full attention: when the Russian starts to say something the *Palmachnik* barks out the word "Silence!" in Hebrew. Palestina is suddenly terrified by the strangeness. Turetsky isn't holding her any more, she could take off and instantly lose herself in the maze of the camp. Instead she stares at the cigarette lighter flame and the graceful swirls of Arabic characters it illuminates. She recognizes only one word, *yahud*, Jew, as in "Jews not permitted beyond this point."

When Crazy Itzik looks up at Turetsky his expression is unreadable. "There's no reason why I should trust you," he says, "except that this fits in with a lot of other information we've been getting. Only the time frame is more advanced."

The Russian nods. "They're liquidating Herzliya Camp and Rosh Ha'ayin Camp first because this is such a sensitive sector." Crazy Itzik nods in turn, and Palestina thinks again of the shooting in the night. According to rumor the Iraqi forward positions are no more than ten kilometers away, giving the Republic no breathing room at all between the sea and the start of the Samaritan foothills. But – *liquidation* – "When?" she hears herself ask. The men pay her no attention.

"Well," says Crazy Itzik, "our preparations will have to be moved up, that's for sure. I'll have to get busy tonight. Thanks for this," and the papers and lighter disappear into his pocket. "If you'll excuse me," he adds, with the briefest of nods at the young man and the girl, and takes a swift stride in the direction of the center of camp.

"Just a minute," Turetsky says. The *Palmachnik* turns slightly and says casually, "Yes?" The bottom drops out of Palestina's stomach when she notices his hand is in his other jacket pocket.

"I want something in return."

Palestina can't see Crazy Itzik's mouth under all that red beard, which looks in the dimness as if it is singed around the edges. Turetsky points at the pocket where the papers are concealed.

"I took those from the commandant's office. If they catch me..."

A nod. "All right. We can get you out." Another shock for Palestina; as far as anybody in the camp knows, only the smaller children can get in and out with black-market provisions, and they are caught and beaten often enough. But Turetsky is shaking his head, to the amazement of both Palestina and Crazy Itzik.

"Not good enough. I want to bring her out with me."

"What?" Even though it comes out almost as a shout, the men are still ignoring her, their eyes locked on each other, so she takes one step over to Turetsky and grabs him by the arm hard enough



to make him flinch. "I'm not going, you hear me? I won't go anywhere without my mother." There, that'll fix him. There's no way the KGB defector will drag two women along with him while he runs for his life. It's the best way out of the situation, she figures; she still doesn't trust him, and this will unmask him for the turncoat and selfish bastard he surely is.

But Turetsky, still looking at Crazy Itzik, says, "And her mother."

The penitent turns to face the girl and a hint of a smile appears under his beard. "Palestina Ben-Zion."

She actually lets out a tiny yelp. Crazy Itzik never calls anybody in the camp by name, he seems not to recognize the distinctions between people, busy as he is in his own world. She can't get her mind around the idea that it was all an act. He turns back to the Russian when she can't make her lips form coherent words. "All right, my friend. An exit visa for three. By the trash midden there's a lean-to with a corrugated metal roof. You know the one, Palestina. Inside there's a pile of broken cardboard cartons, covering the entrance to a tunnel."

The Russian makes a little bow and says, "Many thanks, Commander."

"Deputy commander. Be careful when you come out the other end, you'll be at the edge of the beach."

"Many thanks."

"*Al lo davar*," Crazy Itzik mutters as the defector drags the speechless girl off with him: it's nothing. But it isn't true. The tunnel means a great deal. Five men and two women risked their lives digging it over a period of months, and he has just given it away. Even if the three fugitives get away successfully, the camp guards will deduce the existence of the tunnel and turn the place upside down until they find it. Inmates will suffer, and in the meantime other, more hazardous exits to the outside world will have to be improvised.

But all that pales in significance compared to the ramifications of the papers in his pocket. It was only logical that with war looming, the Republic would sooner or later implement its own Final Solution, but it seems the underground has far less time to prepare for it than they'd thought. The deputy commander considers again the possibility that this is a ruse designed to make the underground show its hand, but dismisses the thought with a mental shrug. What's left of the Hagana is going to have to make its move soon anyway; the *Mukhbarat* and the camp guards are grinding it to nothing by attrition. For just a moment, Crazy Itzik lets himself dwell on the irony that the remnants of the Zionist leadership are desperately working for emigration from Palestine. And the new Diaspora! – a guilt-ridden West Germany, with Hitler just sixteen years in his grave, and America, the patrons of the already *judenrein* United Hashemite Kingdom! The Republic has been squeezing that fact for every drop of propaganda value it's worth, but this won't be the first time Nasser has reversed course without so much as blinking. And since when has the world ever cared what happens to the Jews?

Crazy Itzik tells himself sternly to buck up. There's no time to waste on self-pity, heroics, all that romantic prattle. Start down that path and you'll end up like Begin: the ghetto Jew in the thinnest of Zionist disguises. This is all his fault anyway, him and his obvious Masada deathwish. The *Palmachnik* refuses actually to feel the slightest shred of the remorse he pretends every waking moment. But he does, very occasionally, allow himself a tiny amount of practical regret: if only Begin hadn't refused to leave the damned ship! Oh well, you can't do anything about history, and in the present there are thousands more Palestinas to be rescued. ■

The Rising Tide

Beneath the night-clad sky of a golden colonized globe, Rayleigh Marsonnet walked the lightswept roads as any Free-born citizen might do. Corsicon City was that evening playing host to a conference of the United Starion Republic's wealthiest business leaders. But that event was to take place in the Silver Tower, and his focus had not yet been drawn there. He did not choose to sip elegant drinks from crystal glasses, to speak thoughtlessly of vast sums of credit or to condemn the Revolution in the outraged tones of those whose very security in their own power made them arrogantly contemptuous of any real threat.

No, he wanted to breathe a little. He wanted to feel alive.

Among the streets laid down like an endless carpet at the Tower's iridium feet, the atmosphere was heavily perfumed with the dampness of an approaching storm. The night air was pierced with halogen spears, and a blue abrading wind howled in gusts along the road. People walked the narrow concrete-steel canyon, and occasionally a vehicle pushed rudely between them. Hawkers cried out from markets huddled under tattered awnings. In the midst of this dark metropolitan scene, Rayleigh, with the brim of his hat pulled down to his eyes, slid through the draped doorway into the cavern of a darkened shop. He pulled the door closed behind him, sealing the street outside.



He smelt wax, and a soft incense. Yellow stripes of candlelight revealed the eyes of long dead animals, traced out the elaborate curves of ancient woodworks, and dissolved in ethereal currents against a splash of modern art. Rayleigh had a passion for these places. Like all passions, it carried a risk of sorts.

Someone moved, very slightly, out of the shadow. Rayleigh saw the gold line of a nose, the gilt reflection of lips, two wary eyes and a layered outfit of a drab material. The young man opened his mouth. Rayleigh got in first.

"Jet said you had a Veil for me."

The eyes narrowed, the response was abrupt. "I don't care for your kind."

He meant, of course, the Elite Rich. Even among the Free-born, they were regarded with powerful passions of allegiance or hatred.

Rayleigh, in spite of his garb, could not be mistaken for anything else. His manner exuded wealth, confidence, power.

"Obviously you don't. But I suspect you would still like to be paid for the privilege of hating me. Do you have what I asked for?"

"Bastard." Hands moved over vases and stones, shifting them aside, keeping one eye warily focused on his customer. "I don't get these often, Veil works." And he, like a sideshow conjurer, pulled aside a stained white sheet, exposing the corner of an indigo sky. The sheet fell away, and the relief landscape glittered blue and gold in the small metallic frame.

Completing the presentation of sorcery, the youth announced, "Jenna duGeddon. One hundred and fifty thousand, cash only."

Rayleigh drew in a deep breath. The pyritic landscape and its startling sky burned through to imprint upon his brain.

Jenna's art.

Briefly, he saw her pale face in the frame. He thought of her locked away there, on that horrendous world with its night-soaked sea, which she refused to leave. How many times had he attempted to persuade her? Rayleigh had lost count.

Preserve your memories for a lifetime...

Somewhere within the room, the eyes of a mechanical cat quietly blinked. Two gold beams glared fractiously through the gloom and were quickly gone. An ancient timepiece chimed a sequence of irregular sounds.

There was an almost imperceptible click, which took up where the clock left off. Rayleigh felt the brush of a weapon against his hair and he became instinctively still, even as he marveled at his own stupidity. He had allowed the youth the chance to move behind him.

"You hypocrite," The voice was soft, but filled with a vitriolic loathing. "I know you - you're the man from the ads. Preserve

your memories for a lifetime - isn't that how the jingle goes? Your company coats things in that gunge stuff, like resin - "

Rayleigh winced. It was a crude analogy, and did not at all capture the complexity, or the beauty, of Capsulation.

"You're tearing the heart from the Veil Worlds - you even buy their fucking art - but you'll shut them out forever - "

Rayleigh breathed slowly, carefully. So *that* was what this was all about.

He asked, very quietly, "What is it that you want?"

"Tell me about the biomines."

"Will you allow me to turn around?"

There was a brief murmur of motion as the young man stepped backward. "Don't do anything stupid or I'll leave your brains on the floor."

Rayleigh twisted slowly around. His golden eyes narrowed. "What are you, a Revolutionary? Where do you come from?"

"None of your fucking business. The biomines - "

"Are replicating in the atmosphere of all the Veil Worlds even as we speak. Unauthorized travel to and from these planets will become impossible. Any ship that attempts it will certainly be destroyed."

"I want the controlling code."

The hint of a smile twisted the corner of Rayleigh's mouth. "You and every Revolutionary agent in this sector. Without the Veil Worlds there won't *be* a Revolution. Which means the code is also worth a great deal of money."

"That's all you care about, isn't it?"

"Not quite," Rayleigh said flatly. "But you're close."

Expecting another answer, the youth frowned. "You will tell me where the code is."

"With pleasure. Right now it is being delivered to the Military arm of the Administration Division of the United Starion Republic, by civilian transport. There are no copies and no electronic records. You are too late."

"I don't believe you."

"That's your problem."

"Is it?" An edge of frustration had crept into the young man's voice. "There are *billions* of people on those worlds. And what about your precious art collection? There won't be any more of those when Geddes is closed off, the artist at the mercy of the occupation force - "

"Jenna duGeddon," Rayleigh said coldly, "was my lover." He was aware of how it would sound. But he had already earned Jenna's hatred. He could do no worse.

Two mirrors opened as the youth's eyes rounded in surprise and disgust - as he lifted them from Rayleigh's bleak face to the vibrant

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topaz and sapphire life of the landscape behind him. "You heartless bastard –"

There was a loud snapping noise, and then the searing burning of flesh. Rayleigh remained almost without motion as the youth crumpled into a dull heap of colourless rags. The weapon strapped to Rayleigh's right hand was the colour of his glove and was so flat that it could almost have been a part of his arm. He was very fast, and the young man had not seen him move.

"Amateur," Rayleigh said derisively, and he stepped forward to touch the man's throat. Then, with a measure of frustration, "Idiot."

He wrapped up Jenna's small landscape, tucked it under his arm and stepped briskly outside into the crowded street. The smell of rain was more powerful now, the storm obviously closer, the atmosphere silvered with a galvanic tension. Market traders were beginning to pack their more precious goods away.

He could see, above the neon palisades of pyramidal steel, the white reflections of the Silver Tower. A cylindrical ghost. Lightning sparked behind it. It was beautiful, expensive, surreal. Rayleigh sighed. He was late.

A soft, insistent beeping flooded into his ear. His personal communicator. "Yes, I know, I know," he muttered with irritation, reaching for the activator inside his shirt. "Who is it?"

"It's Torran, Rayleigh. We have a problem."

Rayleigh stopped. A vehicle came to a sudden halt behind him with its brakes locked on. Waving impatiently to the blare of its horn, he hurried off the road. "Explain."

"The ship is gone."

"It's supposed to be gone –"

"No, Rayleigh. I mean, it's *gone*."

Something of the alarm in Torran's usually composed voice conveyed itself to Rayleigh, for whom the implications were only too apparent. His expression was a curious blend of astonishment and fear, starkly revealed by the glare of electrical advertising, ironically his own words reflected in blue neon letters across his face, *preserve your memories for a lifetime...*

He looked up at the tower, swearing profusely beneath his breath. He couldn't go to the conference now.

Something flashed out from the centre of the smooth silver facade, and he frowned. The flash grew and flared, and shattered – moments later, as the tower broke, a deafening roar flowed out across the sky, and with it came a rush of air and a vibration which caused him to stumble against a nearby wall. Screams and cries of amazement and horror were left as it passed. He returned his gaze to the tower. Though the spine had snapped the skeleton was still in place, and burning, a beacon against the storm.

Rayleigh stood transfixed for many moments, staring. Only after this did he clench one fist and slam it, with some considerable force, into the unyielding wall.

The planetary landscape, from which the Administration Division rose like a platinum obelisk, might have been painted with a scarlet brush – the hot, swollen vermillion sun threw a harsh red glare over the measured architecture of the United Starion Republic.

On the fifty-sixth floor of the Central Administration Building Rayleigh Marsonnet glanced briefly at the window that rose from the dark, carpeted floor to the molded ceiling of the office. The light that speared through the tinted glass was softened to orange before it reached his face; even so, it was a hard illumination.

It was like being on fire.

The Administrator sat behind his desk, his agitation carefully masked. The Division Specialist Jereth Harc, cloaked in his dark skin and piercing eyes, waited beside the olive fractal fronds of a Synthian palm, and now and then caught the gaze of the Administrator, which, like the atmospheric glare, had a burning aspect to it.

"So you are telling me the tower was destroyed to get to me," Rayleigh said through clenched teeth. "I've lost count of the number of attempts on my life in the last sixty cycles. So much for your promised protection!"

"Your protection," came the sharp reply from Jereth Harc, "seems to be your inability to keep to your own schedules. If you decide to take detours without informing –"

Rayleigh cut him short with a wave of his hand. He rose and walked to the window. Red flame fell across his feet, into his eyes. "And now you tell me that the ship is gone. And with it the only version of the biomine operating code." He was angry. "If anyone came to know the code was on that particular ship, it wasn't my people they got the information from!"

Jereth growled, but said nothing.

The Administrator rose from the desk and stepped out onto the smoldering floor. "First things first. Is there – possibly – a copy?"

Rayleigh remained motionless by the window. "Your security," he said, with contempt. "You wiped the brains of my engineers. No electronic recording of the code, to prevent remote theft. My only working hard copies destroyed, before you took possession." Now he turned. "You were there, you supervised the destruction."

The Administrator smiled tightly. "Yes. It seems we did our job too well. The risk of it falling into revolutionary hands at a later stage was just too great."

"You didn't want to risk me having that power."

"I think you have far too much power already, Mr Marsonnet, don't you?"

"I've put a lot of it on credit, as it happens. What you are doing to recover my property?"

Jereth Harc exclaimed, startled, "*Your property?*"

"The final payment has not yet been made. Under the conditions of our contract the code and the mines I designed remain mine."

"Oh yes, I forgot." Jereth half-smiled. "You might need the money. Some trouble with Capsulation, I heard. There are lawsuits pending. Have you been killing people, Mr Marsonnet?"

Rayleigh's eyes narrowed. Capsulation was an entirely organic preservative, a distant chemical relation of reptilian saliva. Its development had obsessed him for more than ten years, yet he had never been able to free it of one peculiar, devastating side effect. "It was never intended for live human subjects."

Jereth uttered a short snort of derision. "It's been called the Medusa syndrome. Preserve your memories for a lifetime. What sort of life-death is that? Centuries in some half-sense limbo, or certain death if you attempt to reverse the process?"

"It's something we're working on."

"It's a form of torture."

Rayleigh shrugged, though the expression in his eyes might have cut glass. "Call it what you like. I don't see you dying of concern for the thousand eminent Republican citizens who were on board the transport."

The Administrator was drawn to his desk by a small signal. Information flashed to the screen, words which he digested with little alteration in expression.

"We may be able to help each other after all. It looks like they've found your thief, Mr Marsonnet. A fragment of surveillance signal was retrieved. The man is wanted – a Veil Worlds assassin, Vincent McCullough. He has been traced to Geddes."

Rayleigh froze in utter amazement. His mind spun with hideous possibilities. He said nothing.

Jereth Harc cursed under his breath. "Geddes is one of the worlds we're taking down."

The Administrator continued to read. "He has a contact there – Jenna duGeddon." He looked up. "Are you an art collector, Mr Marsonnet?"

"Of course." Rayleigh smiled tightly. No doubt the Administrator owned at least one of Jenna's works, illegally, in his private home.

"Art notwithstanding, these worlds must be shut off," the Administrator declared with a measured ferocity. "That savage sub-human race...we try to rid them of their barbarity...their games of

death...yet they can never be altered in any way that might make them an acceptable or safe part of our society. Now at least they might be contained...Don't you agree?"

Rayleigh held his smile; cold, rigid. "I like to think that everyone is capable of change. Even you."

The eyes of the Administrator hardened.

Jereth laughed. "And your tolerance has nothing to do with limiting your market, does it? Or will you be pursuing an authorised Veil Worlds Contract?"

The Administrator moved his hand across the screen. "We must act at once. If McCullough is working for the Revolution, they will soon be able to use the code to control the mines for their own protection. *We couldn't touch them.*"

Rayleigh laughed. He couldn't help himself. Their indignation at having their own trick turned back upon themselves amused him distinctly. But the laugh died away as the Administrator began to dictate orders for their immediate journey to Geddes.

"The mines are armed in twenty-three cycles. You won't do it in time."

The Administrator did not blink. "Of course, you will yourself accompany Jereth Harc and his team. Your expertise will be – essential."

A flash of anger crossed the amber eyes, but was quickly gone. Rayleigh thought of Jenna. Could he see her? Perhaps *this* time, she might come away with him.

"As you wish. I must call my production manager."

Geddes opened up beneath him within congested space and fleeting time – always too little time – and Rayleigh found himself returned to this peculiar place, to the narrow fingers of land that stretched out, as if in some imploring gesture, across the black, global sea.

Almost all the spaceworthy vehicles had gone. Among those that had not was one that Rayleigh recognized with relief. His call to Torran had been answered.

An escape mechanism, just in case.

Just in case *what?*

Jereth Harc and his squad went ahead of him. They walked from the spaceport to the promenade that ran alongside the Geddon Tide, the improbable onyx ocean. They fought their way through the panic of those who were desperate to escape the planet that would soon become their prison.

The idea that they might survive on one world without the possibility of travel to others was inconceivable.

Rayleigh paused when he saw the Tide.

« Rayleigh's eyes narrowed. Capsulation was an entirely organic preservative, a distant chemical relation of reptilian saliva »

« Rayleigh turned away, toward the horizon where sky met Tide, and where, along the beach, levitations of steel and glass hung out above the sea »

The streets were full of people. He closed his eyes. A warm breeze touched his cheek. His hand closed around the railing.

The crowds in the street had become strangely silent. Next to him, Vincent set down the bloody corpse of their last kill – the slaying that would once again win them the game. The man's head lolled back upon the road, a ribbon of red about his throat that Rayleigh had tied there with a laser bolt.

Now, Rayleigh lifted his own wrist and examined the weapon strapped comfortably to his arm. There were no charges left. He had lived by a fraction of several instants. And there was blood in his mouth.

The Adjudicators had not yet approached them. The win must be formally declared – the rules of the game were clear upon that point. Four teams of four, and two to be left alive from the winning team. No less, nor necessarily more, than that.

Vincent straightened. Like Rayleigh, his face was smeared with grime, his jacket soaked in sweat and blood. He was Rayleigh's height and build, with dark hair to the other's fawn crown, raven to gold. But it occurred to Rayleigh how alike they must seem, the Champions of the Tide, drenched in murder, addicted to it. Both poised with instinctive, feline wariness (in spite of the game being over) – the constant threat to their lives had molded them to it. And none a greater threat to each, than the other.

It was more than just a matching of their skills. There was also Jenna. Who was, presumably, walking the line of the Tide, the division between the land and the world's end, a place she claimed uniquely as her own.

Rayleigh heard a soft murmuring, the velvet waves of the Tide rolling over the shore. He saw the crowd part to admit the Adjudicators – and the muzzle of Vincent's weapon raised to his face, the dual delivery system poised for another, more exquisite murder, and then the voice of the Adjudicator, saying firmly:

"You know the rules. Two must be alive, to win..."

Vincent smiled.

Rayleigh opened his eyes abruptly. The flat, unreflective darkness of the Tide filled them. By the Tide's edge, one of Jereth Harc's men was reaching down to test the strange liquid with his finger. Rayleigh, suddenly cold, shouted a warning.

It was too late.

Like an ebony tongue, the fluid folded up and around the crouching figure and soundlessly swallowed him as if he had never been. Not a ripple remained to mark his passing, not even a footprint in the black sand.

Effortlessly, Rayleigh vaulted the railing. "Get back!" he cried, and inexplicably they heeded him, those of Harc's people who had

rushed to the assistance of their colleague.

"He's gone," Rayleigh breathed. "This is not an ocean to swim in. Stay away from it."

Jereth was angry, unsettled. "What the –"

"Listen to me," Rayleigh snapped, "this world is dangerous. The people are dangerous. The Tide is dangerous. Touch *nothing*."

Jereth's dark eyes fixed upon Rayleigh's flushed and pale face. "And you, Mr Marsonnet. Are you dangerous too?"

Rayleigh turned away, toward the horizon where sky met Tide, and where, along the beach, levitations of steel and glass hung out above the sea. "We don't have much time."

Above his head the biominers were copying themselves, each copy fecund, self-replicating. The fact of this exponential breeding now caused Rayleigh to shiver, even as his pride salved him for their development.

He walked quickly away along the shore, out of the Tide's grasping reach. Now he knew where he was to go, but was not at all certain of the welcome he would receive once he got there. Jenna, as well as Vincent, might raise a gun to his head and pull the trigger.

Certainly, she had good cause to.

Her house was on, and over, the shore. It hung in space, suspended above the kohl plate of the predatory Tide.

"This is it," Jereth said decisively. He had done his homework – his spies had tracked Jenna back through the art she breathed across the Starion worlds. Men flowed under his direction like insects about the walls, seeking other doors than the one at the street. Rayleigh, watching carefully as one of them lifted a small green square to the steel door, suddenly realized what Harc was about to do.

"No, wait –"

Weapons raised, they touched the door with the Guardbreaker. The door gave way in fragments. They swept into the house.

Someone was at home.

They found Jenna in a large chamber overlooking the Tide. She was instinctively still as the invasion flowed around her and past, guns level, to seek other occupants of the vast house. Jereth Harc and Rayleigh came in behind them. Her expression changed when she saw them.

For a moment, Rayleigh could only stare at her.

She would not have passed for Free-born; her beauty was exotic, pale, delicately inhuman. She gazed at Rayleigh with cool hostility, as her initial fright at the sudden entry evaporated.

"Hello, *traitor*."

Rayleigh winced. "Jenna –" He came up to her. He had not seen her for quite some while. "Jenna, they're looking for Vinnie. It's urgent."

"How unfortunate," she replied, her voice smooth, like poisoned honey. "He isn't here."

Rayleigh lowered his voice. He could feel Jereth's suspicious gaze upon him, and resented it. "Not here, or not on Geddes at all? Jenna, I *must* find him!" He reached for her shoulders, but she turned fluidly away from him, toward the Tide. Its blackness soaked up the window. The sky too was darkening, an unconscious mirror of the landscape beneath it.

Rayleigh moved around her. She said nothing, and only looked at him with eyes that matched the sky. He had missed her, far more than he thought possible.

He said softly, "I haven't forgotten you."

Her response was cold. "You're only an illusion, Rayleigh."

Possibly that was true, but he let it pass. "Jenna – you've heard of the biomines?"

"You're going to slam the door in our faces. Yes, I've heard."

"They switch on in less than three cycles. Without the code we cannot turn them off. There are no copies – Vincent took that code from me. He took the ship."

Jenna's eyes widened slightly. The expression was ambiguous. Perhaps she already knew – that was likely, Vincent would have told her.

Jereth intervened, his patience exhausted. "Is this murmuring leading anywhere, Marsonnet?" He came violently between them and struck Jenna with the heel of his gun, so that she stepped backward and fell heavily to the floor. "If you know where the bastard is, I think you should tell us."

Jenna did not answer him. Her hand was raised to her face, and there was blood on her fingers.

Rayleigh turned his head to Jereth. "I suggest that you don't do anything like that again." His voice was quiet, unsettling, different.

"Get out of here, Rayleigh," Jenna said, without looking up. "Or you won't live long enough to see your precious toys at play."

Rayleigh stiffened. He glanced out over the Tide, from which the night had swept in like a storm. He felt a sudden stab of familiar terror. "Shit. Vinnie *is* here, isn't he?"

As if to answer him, one of Harc's men burst breathlessly into the room. "Slazie has been killed!" A blaze of gunfire opened up over the sea, as another of Harc's company fired at something unseen in the dark. Jereth moved instinctively toward the sound. Rayleigh, acting equally on instinct, pulled him back.

"Come with me!" He did not wait for a response. Instead, he hauled Jereth from the room and through a geometric maze of clean, white space.

"In here!"

It was a chamber with no windows – the only one of its kind in the house, yet every Geddon dwelling had at least one. There was just a single door. Rayleigh slammed it closed. Only the sound of weaponry came through it. Inside there was a pale, softly bleached light.

"Damn you, Marsonnet!" Harc said harshly, disoriented and disheveled. "There's going to be an investigation into this!"

Rayleigh had torn back his expensive sleeve to reveal the slender, sandy panels of a fully charged atomic rifle. Held by straps to his arm, the firing mechanism folded down into his fist. He raised his hand, and his fingers brushed Jereth's face.

"Mr Harc," he said calmly, "I think you're wiser than that."

Jereth Harc looked at the cold glint of ice in the amber eyes and at that moment did not doubt that Rayleigh Marsonnet would kill him.

And what of Rayleigh himself? There had been no metamorphosis – he was as he had always been. As he liked to forget that he was. But there could be no forgetting. Geddes had warped him to it.

And he hated the thought of it, but there it was, all the same.

"You are a Starion citizen," Jereth Harc said carefully. This departure from his plans was something deeply disturbing, unexpected. "I don't believe an investigation into such an eminent person as yourself is warranted. Forgive me. I spoke in haste."

"Of course, Mr Harc, I accept your apology."

His breathing shallow, his anger barely in check, Jereth asked, "What do you intend to do?"

Rayleigh lowered his arm a little and leant back against a wall. "Wait till it grows quiet. Until they are all dead, or almost so. And then I intend to locate the Veil Code."

"Will we be safe here?"

"For a little while." Rayleigh smiled tightly. "If Vinnie has any idea of what he's got then he knows we have to come out. Time is not on our side."

"He *must* know –"

"Perhaps – perhaps not. For him, it is only a game."

Harc's eyes narrowed with the familiar suspicion. "It sounds as though you know him well."

"We've met once or twice."

"And you didn't care to disclose that fact earlier?"

"No, I did not."

Jereth Harc watched the way Rayleigh tautly covered the door with the rifle, and said nothing.

They were silent for a long while. Too long. Many things went through Rayleigh's brain in that apparently endless stretch of time. But his most disturbing thought was of Jenna, that he had lost her

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again, that *this* time, it might be for good.

"I'm going out," he whispered to Harg. "If you want to live, stay here and do not open the door."

"But what –"

"Shut up and stay quiet." Rayleigh inched open the door and slipped through it.

The room was veiled in a lunar shroud. He listened, stepping silently along the corridors and through the sparsely furnished rooms. Then he noticed that the great glass doors were open to the balcony that swung out over the Tide. The moonlight had invaded the house.

And then he saw Jenna.

Rayleigh moved to the open door, as close as he dared.

Three moons lit up the black absorbance of the Geddon Tide. Jenna sat motionless beyond the platform's edge, upon a risen hand of the charcoal sea. A thread of it wound around her nakedness, revealing white flesh in horizontal lines. She seemed to be unaware of it, unfeeling of the wet viscosity against her skin – and unpalatable to whatever hunger it possessed.

One moon fell, protesting, below the edge of the sky.

Jenna raised her hands. Before her was a shimmering web – a gossamer outline, the blank slate of her art. As her fingers spread outward the Tide seemed to shudder – rolling away, it disgorged itself upon the frame –

Even from this distance, Rayleigh could distinguish the features of the young officer they had lost on the beach, cast in blue, as though a sheen of flexible metal had been worked over him. Jenna caressed it, molded the flesh...

A wave curled softly upon the shore. The whisper of a laugh came bubbling to the surface, and died there.

Rayleigh suddenly realized what it was that she was doing. He wanted to cry out, to stop her.

But he said nothing.

Then he became aware, slowly awakening to the uneasy sensation of a presence behind him. He turned about.

In precise, geometric lines of darkness and lunar glare, the assassin Vincent McCullough stood watching him. His sharp face was clearly revealed by the sterile light, as was one broad shoulder and long arm, from which the titanium reflections peeled away, the only glimpse of the weaponry welded to his hand. He wore a barely discernable expression of cold amusement.

Rayleigh let out his breath, carefully, slowly. "Vinnie."

Vincent smiled. "I see you've found Jenna." His voice was like velvet, every aspect of him under flawless self-control. Rayleigh shivered, and thought again of the woman molding life into death

as one might compose a holo-lase landscape, but he dared not turn his back to verify his memories.

"Capsulation," Vincent continued, with just a measured hint of sarcasm. "Isn't that how you market it, Rayleigh?"

He gasped, but made no other sudden motion. That might be fatal. "A preservative! Not a means for endowing a living death!"

"Of course." The smile was fixed. "Of death, I prefer the permanent sort. But then permanence is a by-word of yours, as well."

Their civility was a thin veneer of ice, well cracked about the edges. Some seven years before, in an indirect and rather brutal way, they had fought – for Jenna. And she had instinctively chosen Vincent, the silent killer of the dark; Vincent, whose slim muscles flexed like a cat's, lithe and strong, who could easily break a man's spine; Vincent, whose formidable intelligence made him more than highly dangerous. Rayleigh had never quite recovered from the blow. He had tried to snare Jenna's heart – he never thought to look into her brain.

"The Tide is alive, Rayleigh." Vincent looked past him, though his eyes never seemed to leave the other man's face. "It is a dark pool, and it has a black soul."

Outside, the waves turned over in silence. Another moon blinked out, swallowed without mercy by an unyielding horizon.

The shadows seemed to lengthen. The surviving moon was sliding down across the night. But still Jenna worked, obsessed, oblivious to all but what she did.

"But you knew," Vincent murmured, "you knew that before humans came to this planet the Tide had very little food. That in order to survive it had evolved the perfect chemistry for keeping animals in suspension, so that a single meal might last for centuries. You had Jenna collect the samples you wanted, from which you fashioned your beautiful preservative." His mouth twisted at one corner. "Jenna is immune. It won't harm her. It feeds through her. It *lives*, through her. When you left, you took a part of that with you."

Rayleigh knew it. Vincent read him like an open file, now, as he had always done.

Vincent clenched and unclenched his hands – a simple, flexing motion. Light fell off the weapon, and lay in broken pieces on the floor. Again, the assassin smiled. There was a great deal in his smile that Rayleigh didn't like. "Come with me," Vincent said flatly. "There is something I wish to show you."

Rayleigh did not, could not, refuse. He moved slowly, carefully, in the direction Vincent indicated. The killer was near, but instinctively out of reach should Rayleigh attempt to disarm him. Not that Rayleigh would – he knew better than that.

Vincent flowed, like the Tide. Making no sound that might

indicate his movement, or even his existence. Envious, Rayleigh felt distinctly clumsy. Though he too was silent, and smooth.

They passed through a doorway, and along a corridor of glass into which the night spilled in great waves of blue and black, crested in moonlight. Across the Tide they walked, suspended in dark air. Toward a little visited wing of the building, an island.

A pressure pad on the wall opened a new door at a touch. They had arrived at their destination. Inside there was a great hollowness, a vast chamber of space. Ribs of steel bent to a point, holding a sky of glass. There were frames, unfinished or discarded art. The undead, in shadows and sharp stripes of light. It was Jenna's studio.

Vincent held a cord in his fingers. Steadily, he pulled it down toward the floor. A cover of linen came away from the wall.

Behind it was revealed a towering panoramic frame meshed with a thousand screaming faces, a thousand frozen lives, standing almost in line, each crowded upon the other, some arrayed in front and behind, and all brushed with that harsh, metallic indigo.

Rayleigh did nothing but stare, though he remained aware, even in his horror, of Vincent beside him. Only now there were a thousand pairs of eyes and a thousand, open, soundless mouths crying and condemning him. All of them conscious, aware of their prison, awaiting an impossible rescue. He had come to value life, in his own way. Murder was one thing – this was quite another.

Jenna had not only made it real, she had framed it for him.

"She intended this to be her masterpiece," the assassin said softly. "She wanted it to hurt. Of course, it was you she had in mind. She always said that she would bring you back here, where you belong."

Rayleigh wrenched his head away. Vincent's eyes were cold and hard.

"Oh yes," Vincent murmured, unsmiling, "she's more deadly, more cruel, than ever I could be." Then he laughed. "Jenna told me about the ship. Ironic, isn't it? I wasn't after your code at all. Only the lives on it – Free-born lives. It was a gift – for Jenna."

Rayleigh turned a little toward the wall of glass. He had almost (though not quite) forgotten the code.

He asked, with renewed urgency, "Where is the ship, Vinnie?"

Vincent uttered a brief laugh, and pointed to the glass, to the blackness of the moonlit night beyond, and the blacker blackness of the Tide beneath. "In *there*."

Rayleigh felt his shoulders drop.

Vincent watched him with a remote curiosity. "Indulge me," he murmured. "Tell me about the code."

"The code was woven into the structure of the ship. The ultimate security measure. Anonymity would protect the craft – I hoped."

Vincent smiled slightly. "Forgive me for asking. But it was almost

as though someone wanted the ship to be taken. The alarm system had been tampered with – it needed little persuasion. And the human security was conspicuously absent. As if you were waiting for me. But it wasn't me you were expecting?"

Rayleigh's eyes narrowed.

"So," said the killer, still in the same, velvet voice, "for how long have you been financing the Revolution, Rayleigh?"

Rayleigh opened his mouth to deny it, and caught the frozen impasse of Vincent's expression, brilliant, and unmistakable.

He said nothing. What was there to say?

"No doubt you felt the need for liberation," Vincent continued. "You've always passed for Free-born, as I have. And having listened to and colluded in their insults for so long, you saw your chance to take control – by stealing your own code."

Rayleigh looked at Vincent and for just a moment there was a flash of contempt in his eyes of which the killer would have approved. "Except that you got there before me. Or I might have been able to free them."

"How very noble."

"Yes," said Jereth Harc from the doorway. "How very noble. You don't strike me as a noble man, Marsonnet."

Rayleigh looked across as Harc stepped into the room, weapon raised. Vincent remained beneath a slender shadow carelessly thrown by a steel beam, as if the moonlight would not fall on him, and in all probability it would not.

Harc eyed the assassin warily. "I'm not interested in you, McCullough. Only with this – traitor."

Rayleigh laughed – with obvious disdain he turned and walked to the window. There he paused and looked back at Jereth with an undisguised hatred.

Vincent looked slowly from one to the other. "We all kill for profit," he murmured quietly. "Perhaps that is our only true claim to kinship."

The weapon, when it fired, was strangely silent. Jereth was lifted back against the frame of the door as both projectiles caught him, the lower passing through his heart and killing him instantly. He fell to the floor and lay still across the threshold.

Rayleigh looked at Vincent with narrowed eyes.

Vincent smiled.

Rayleigh was already moving when the rifle fired for the second time. He felt a sudden searing pain as the lower bolt passed through his right shoulder. It carried him back against the glass – but the upper bolt had got there before him, shattering the glittering wall so that his weight was enough to take him through it and into free-fall.

« Rayleigh was already moving when the rifle fired for the second time. He felt a sudden searing pain as the lower bolt passed through his right shoulder »

For a full, terrifying second he hung in space, before space disgorged him.

The black liquid folded up around him. It flowed into his eyes, down his throat. Flailing, he tried to swim. But liquid fingers grasped at his clothes and his skin, and pulled him down. Featureless, opaque, smothering. He fought it, even as it drank his blood.

Jenna's dark eyes blinked in the shadows, a dream. He was even able to appreciate the irony, as he sank - the thought that he might be put into his own portrait, that her hands would raise him into life again. That he would hang upon her wall, condemned to watch her forever from such a distance.

Preserve your memories for a lifetime...

Jenna came into the chamber to find Vincent standing by the broken wall. She wore a long, pale gown and her feet fell softly on the moon-washed floor. A piece of the sky was broken. She looked out of it.

She said, "So he didn't really abandon us after all."

Vincent laughed, low and cold. "He has *now*."

Jenna frowned. "All the same, I didn't want it to end like that."

"We are none of us angels, Jenna. Or revolutionaries. Only self-serving murderers."

She shrugged, but her eyes never left the glass plate of the Tide. There was a black bruise around the cut on her face, and it hurt her to speak. "He killed when he had to, and perhaps he enjoyed it. But he did care enough to want us to be free. Resolve that paradox, if you dare."

The distant noise of blast engines reached them, and there were flashes of burning light on the horizon. Everything that could make orbit was leaving the planet. Now there was also gunfire, and the sound of screaming. Jenna flexed her wrist, and a careful observer might have noticed the flat chameleon weapon she had strapped, Geddon style, to her left arm.

She said, "There isn't much time. If you must go, go now."

Vincent came to stand beside her. "It won't be forever. But as to when - the code will be in your hands, soon."

She smiled. "Yes, I know."

He touched her briefly - and then he was gone.

The third moon grew a strange colour as it sank toward the sea.

Jenna turned to the Tide, her other lover.

C.A.L. runs a small graphic design business on Australia's NSW Central Coast, and is currently working on the final chapters of a fantasy novel.

INTERMISSION



STORIES › SUMMER'S END by JAMIE BARRAS › ILLUSTRATED by MACIEJ BLAZEJCZYK

Jamie Barras | Summer's End

The Kampala Ziggurat, 19 August 2007. Post-Hijack Day 63.

"Real country of residence?"

"The UK - England."

The repatriations officer had the face of a woman in her late twenties, but her hair - the great giveaway to pre-Hijack age - was a rich silver-grey. Beads of sweat glistened on her brow; more sweat stained the underarms of her loose-fitting blouse. She was feeling the heat. It was hot inside the blister, I was just as conscious of that as she was, but I wasn't suffering as much: my body was still running to Hijacked norms. And I wasn't doing anything to fight that.

"Region?" The officer's accent was what they were now calling 'type-2', just like Mary-jaf's, but there was also a hint of something else in there, something pre-Hijack, the sound of her original accent returning. I had spoken to Mary-jaf's family enough to recognise from the repatriations officer's accent that she, like they, was born locally. The ziggurat, for better or worse, was where she belonged now.

"Manchester," I said, in my own cut-glass type-1 accent. I had carried a Hijacker around inside my head for five months. My speech centres, like the rest of my body, were still wedded to the norms that it had imposed on them across that time. I could think in English easily enough, but when I opened my mouth to speak only Hijacker talk came out. And that was just one of the new habits that I was finding hard to break...

"The English North-West was arborealised," the repatriations officer said.

"I know." The Hijackers had returned much of Northern Europe and North America to the wild - made a game park of the two continents. In the process, they had shifted much of the population of the two continents south. This was why the nations of Equatorial Africa had woken up, post-Hijack, to find themselves playing host to over 160 million unwitting illegal immigrants - a situation that they were eager to correct now that they were sitting on some of the most valuable real estate in the world. The Hijackers, with their love of heat and high humidity, had built most of their supercities in the tropics. Given the history of relations between Africa and Europe, the nations of Equatorial Africa didn't want to give the governments of North America and Europe any excuse to claim a share in the governance of the African supercities, which was why they wanted those cities cleared of North American and European nationals as quickly as was humanly possible.

The repatriations officer looked sharply at me: *I wasn't finished*. "Is there somewhere else you can show a connection with?"

"I'm from South-East England originally," I said. "I found out last week that I still have family there - in one of the off-shore lodges. I'd like to join them."

"Same name?"

"Yes."

She glyph-talked to her interface. "Lodge?"

And then we woke up...

"Anchor-Point Deal."

More glyph-talk, and then the chirrup of a response; the repatriations officer rocked her shoulders up and down – Hijacker for 'yes'. "Do you wish to register any retained skills at this time?"

Did I remember anything useful from all that time that I had spent carrying a Hijacker around in my head? Not in the way that she meant. I shook my head. "No."

She passed that answer along to her interface. Then fixed her gaze on me once more. "And finally: do you wish to include any downtime dependants?"

"No," I tried to say, but the word became stuck in my throat. I cleared my throat and tried again. "No. No one."

An air-conditioner coughed into life somewhere in the blister. Moments later, I felt a cool breeze wash over my shoulders. The repatriations officer closed her eyes and sighed with relief. I suppressed a shiver.

After I left the repatriations office, I boarded a train for the core. The repatriations office was inside a blister on terrace twelve of the ziggurat; the suite of rooms that I shared with Mary-jaf was set inside the structure itself, four floors above terrace five. I calculated that if I made the next down-core hoop I could be home in twenty minutes.

'Home': the day was fast approaching when I would have to stop calling it that. I brushed that thought aside.

The train moved deeper and deeper into the ziggurat. After only a short while, it slowed to a halt. The doors irised open and I joined the stream of disembarking passengers, allowing myself to be carried along by them in the direction of the hoop station. As I walked, I idly tuned in and out of the conversations going on around me. I heard someone say that fighting had broken out in the Kinshasa-Brazzaville towers. It was depressing news; I tuned it out.

A PA system blared into life; the next down-core hoop was ready to leave. The people around me started to hurry towards the station. I went with them.

Pressing my palm to the door sensor, I waited for the door to open and then entered the suite. The door irised shut again behind me, but I hardly noticed: Mary-jaf was over by one of the windows, standing looking out.

I stopped to look at her, to drink her in. She was wearing a loose robe that left most of her back bare. My eyes were drawn irresistibly to the spot where the line of her spine became lost in the shadows cast by the cloth falling away from her lower back. Then she began to turn towards me, and as she turned the cloth shifted and the shadows disappeared revealing the whole of the base of her spine and the crease and curve of her buttocks. My breath caught in my throat. I felt my cheeks flush with the first stirrings of desire.

Mary-jaf looked up, and I saw desire spark in her eyes too. The Hijackers inside us had brought us together so that they could use our bodies to satisfy whatever feelings they'd had for each other. The chemistry that we shared was not of our making. It existed because of the connections that had formed and the pathways that had opened up in our brains across that time. We both knew

it, but that did nothing to lessen the charge that passed between us whenever we saw each other. We were a new habit that we were both finding hard to break.

I started to cross the room towards her, but quickly faltered: the desire that I had seen spark in her eyes a moment earlier had been snuffed out, and something darker, heavier had replaced it. My stomach tightened into a knot: something was wrong. I hurriedly closed the distance between us. "What is it?" Reaching her, I took hold of her hand. Her touch was searing: she was burning up. There was something very wrong.

"What is it?" I repeated, searching her face. She stared back at me, and I saw how much she was dreading having to answer that question. And that was all it took to make everything clear. Still not speaking, Mary-jaf let go of my hand and moved back towards the window. I joined her there. The waters of Lake Victoria stretched away to the horizon. The lake was busy with boats and ships of every size moving between the ziggurat and satellite habitats built on islands to the south and east. Just like the trains, just like the hoops, those boats and ships ran on autopilot, quite outside of our control.

Outside of our control. I turned towards Mary-jaf. "They've found David, haven't they?" David Kafabusa. Mary-jaf's husband. She nodded slowly. "Where?" *Let it be far from here.*

Mary-jaf swallowed. Then, at last, she broke her silence. "Here. He is here in Kampala. North-Nine-Eight." *North side, terrace nine, level eight. Less than half an hour away.*

I felt light-headed suddenly. I reached out and placed my hand against the window to steady myself. "When I went to visit my parents, Papa Kafabusa was there," Mary-jaf said, seemingly oblivious. "The government had called him and Mama Kafabusa with the news."

"Was it post-Hijack amnesia?"

"Yes. And according to the official that Papa Kafabusa spoke to David still remembers little except his name."

Hundreds of millions of people worldwide were still suffering from some degree of amnesia, post-Hijack. The more time that had passed without David's name appearing on any glyph-list, the more convinced Mary-jaf and her in-laws had become that David must be one of those people. But, where in the world could he be? My departing Hijacker had deposited me 4,000 miles from home, and there were still people trying to get back from the Moon. Now the two families knew: David was here, just as Mary-jaf was, just as both her family and his were, in the vast structure that the Hijackers had erected on top of the ruins of the city that they had all called home pre-Hijack.

"Have...have you been to see him?" I asked. I could imagine how the meeting with her father-in-law might have gone. Mary-jaf's family and in-laws pretended not to know of her living situation. Making an issue out of it would have forced them to confront something that they, just like people the world over, were doing their best to forget: under the control of the Hijackers inside us, we had many of us shared our beds with strangers. I think that they recognised that the relationship would come to a natural end, either when David came back to them or when the

Ugandan government deported me, whichever came first. Unlike the repatriations officer – unlike most people, post-Hijack, myself included – Mary-jaf was as young as she looked, and at 23 just one year younger than her husband. They had only been married a few months before the Hijackers came so there were no children to consider – a double blessing given the offhand way that the Hijackers had treated the children of Earth. And so the families had felt able to leave well enough alone up until now. But now that David had come back to them, I was sure that Papa Kafabusa, backed by Mary-jaf's parents, would have insisted that Mary-jaf go straight to him.

After a long moment, Mary-jaf shook her head. "No, I have not been to see him yet."

I let that sink in. At length I said, "What are you going to do?"

Mary-jaf turned towards me at last. "What did the official say?"

She had struck on the question that I had been dreading having to answer. "Three weeks," I said. "They're going to deport me in three weeks."

It had seemed so short a time when the repatriations officer had first said it. Now, with the prospect of Mary-jaf leaving, it suddenly seemed like forever. Three weeks of living in the ziggurat without her, while knowing that she was still here somewhere; living with her husband and sharing her bed with him. Not a prospect that I wanted to face.

Mary-jaf. My Mary-jaf. I was the only one who called her that: 'Jaf' was a Hijacker suffix of endearment, the sort of word that people all over the world were abandoning in their rush to rid themselves of all Hijacker habits. I still used it because it reinforced that connection I wasn't ready to sever, the pathway I wasn't ready to close.

I was being selfish, but I couldn't help it: I didn't want to let go just yet, I wasn't ready. The chemistry, however it had come into being, was still strong. But what did Mary-jaf want? In a general sense I already knew the answer to that question. I had seen for myself how much it had hurt her to have to pore over the glyph-lists day after day and still not see her husband's name there. But what did she want at this moment? I looked into her eyes trying to make sense of what I saw there.

She looked away. "I'm going to see David. I'm going to him."

"Oh." I backed away from her and sat down on the divan set into the window-room floor. She came after me. Crouching down she laid her hands on my thighs and met and held my gaze. "I'm going to him. He's confused; he has no idea what this place is, how he came here – how the world has changed. Do you remember how that felt? I can't let him face that alone."

"I..." Words failed me.

"He's going to stay with his parents," Mary-jaf said. She stared at me.

She was waiting to see how I would react to that, but I didn't know how to react to that. I stared back at her, lost for words.

"I'm going to take him there tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?"

"I'm going to stay with him tonight."

"Oh." My confusion deepened. Unable to take any more, I reached across and took hold of Mary-jaf's hands, lifting them off my thighs. I stared at her, squeezed her hands and shook my head. "I'm sorry, I'm feeling very old and very stupid suddenly. I just... I need you to explain: where does this leave us?"

"I'm going to stay with him tonight," Mary-jaf repeated, "take him to his parents' quarters tomorrow; and then I'm coming back here. I'm coming home."

Her voice had deepened at the last, and as I continued to look into her eyes I saw her pupils begin to dilate. "I'm being deported in three weeks," I reminded her.

"I know." She slipped her hands free of my grasp and began to caress my wrists and forearms.

"What about David?" *Connections formed, pathways opened.* I could feel my cheeks begin to burn.

Her caresses slowed, but only for a moment. "I'll tell him about... this, but not now: after you're gone, when he's recovered. When we know more about what the future holds for... for all of us."

That wasn't what I meant, and she knew it, but I didn't press the point. *The chemistry was still strong.* After a moment, I said, "But his parents –"

"Won't say anything," Mary-jaf put in. "That hasn't changed." *They still want to forget that any of this has happened.*

"But they will put pressure on you to stay with them and David – and your own parents will too."

"Shush," she said. She started to move her hands up my arms. "I'll have to go soon."

I gave in to her. The future, whatever it might hold for us, could wait a little while at least.

But what did the future hold? We had slept right through the Hijacker invasion – if 'invasion' it was. They had come, they had crept into our heads, hijacked our bodies and had us remake the world to their design. Five months later, they were gone – but not through any of our doing. The first that we had known of any of this had been when we woke up...

Who were they? Where had they come from and where had they gone to? People were slowly coming around to the idea that their time on Earth had been nothing more than a summer holiday to them, that all the changes they had made to the planet were just their version of uprooting a few bushes to put up a tent and clear a path to the lakeshore. But if that were true, then it begged another question: did they enjoy their holiday – did they enjoy it so much that they were planning on coming back here again next year?

The Kampala Ziggurat, Post-Hijack Day 63...

Summer's End.

Jamie Barras is a research chemist currently based in Osaka, Japan. He has stories coming out in *Black Static* and *The Leading Edge* soon.

The James White Award is a short story competition open to non-professional writers and is decided by an international panel of judges made up of professional authors and editors. We have enjoyed quite a bit of success since the first year of the award. Two of our winners have gone on to either win other awards for their writing or actually get published, which is exactly why the award was set up.

Previous winners include Mark Dunn, David D. Levine, Julian West and Deirde Ruane. Entries are received from all over the world, and a shortlist is drawn up for the judges. The judges for the 2005 award were Jasper Fforde, Michael Carroll, Teresa Nielson Hayden, and the late Robert Sheckley.

The winning story each year receives a cash prize, a handsome trophy and publication in *Interzone*. From the shortlist of five stories the judges chose as 2005 winner 'A Short History of the Dream Library' by Elizabeth Hopkinson, which begins on this page. Congratulations to Elizabeth.

This year's Award is now open. The closing date is the 1st of August 2006, with the presentation taking place at Octocon, the Irish National Science Fiction Convention, to be held in Maynooth on the weekend of the 14th–15th of October. For more information and rules check out jameswhiteaward.com.

The James White Award was instituted to honour the memory of one of Ireland's most successful science fiction authors, James White. To learn more about James White and his writing please visit SectorGeneral.com. The website contains details of all James White's novels and short stories, interviews with and articles about the author by the likes of David Langford and Mike Resnick, and a detailed biography/bibliography by Graham Andrews. James Bacon, Award Administrator



Milton Bisset has had the same dream every night for twenty years. It is not the world's most profound dream, but Milton seems to like it. It mainly consists of a maze, at the centre of which is a square box. Inside the box is another maze, in which is another box, and so on and so forth until Milton wakes up. The trouble is, it isn't actually Milton's dream. It is the property of the Ministry of Unusual Technology and they want it back.

Sitting on Milton's bedside table every morning when he wakes up is a large flask like an hourglass with tiny holes in the top, containing a white vapour. Sticking to the flask are a thin yellow sticker, which says: MAZE IN A SQUARE BOX (BIZ) 519.03, a square, red sticker, which says: BRITISH BOARD OF DREAM CLASSIFICATION PG (LANGUAGE: NONE; SEX/NUBILITY: ONCE, MILD; VIOLENCE: NONE; OTHER: NONE) and a sticker of indiscriminate colour that has nearly been picked off.

Sitting beside the flask is a letter (placed there by Milton yesterday in a fit of panic), which reads as follows:

Ministry of Unusual Technology
Oddity House
North York Moors

Dear Mr Bisset

RE: Maze in a Square Box (BIZ) 519.03
The above dream was due back at Great Thornham Dream Library on 27 Aug 1984. You have now incurred outstanding library fines of £420007.52. These fines must be paid, and the dream flask returned by Monday next, or action will be taken. Please be aware: this is now a matter of national security.

Yours etc.

Winner of the 2005 James White Award

A Short History of the Dream Library by Elizabeth Hopkinson

Milton Bisset does not have £420007.52. Nor does he wish to give up 'Maze in a Square Box'. It is not that the dream is, as we have said, profound or even particularly exciting. (The sex/nudity warning simply refers to the fact that, in the middle of the third maze, a little purple goblin jumps out from behind a hedge and shows you his bottom.) Furthermore, although there is no sticker of any colour to point this out, the dream is in Hindi, a language Milton Bisset still cannot speak or understand, despite having dreamt in it for twenty years. No, it is simply that, prior to 13 August 1984, Milton cannot remember having had any dreams at all. He feels a great emotional attachment to 'Maze in a Square Box'. He feels anxiety at the thought of giving it up and returning to a dreamless blank. He feels terror that, due to the efficiency of the postal system, it now is Monday next. Plus, since receiving the letter yesterday, he feels a certain amount of confusion, mainly due to the fact that Great Thornham Dream Library is now a hairdresser's and has been a hairdresser's for more than ten years.



A Short History of the Dream Library

The world's first – and indeed only – dream library opened in Great Thornham, Bradford in 1979. Recorded dreams had been devised by prison drugs workers as part of a rehabilitation programme for inmates addicted to hallucinogenic drugs, although early experimentation into the recording of dreams had been undertaken by Victorian eccentric, Sir Bartus Barting, who catalogued an extensive collection of his own dreams in bell jars in his library at Barting Park. He was, however, unable to re-view the dreams without them evaporating forever into the atmosphere, so the enterprise was dubbed a failure until 1963,

when interest in dream technology revived. The probation drugs workers, backed by secret government funding, met with better success. They generally recorded the dreams of prison administrative staff, as these were easily available: after reading a few dozen pre-sentence reports, most probation clerks were liable to drop off anyway.

However, the commercial possibilities of recorded dreams were only realised when an illegal trade in dreams amongst prisoners – and prison staff – was discovered to be taking place, and the first experimental dream library opened at Great Thornham soon afterwards. It operated on a community donor system, a little like blood donation. Volunteers slept in specially assigned dormitories at the local YMCA and their dreams were contained within the now familiar reversible dream funnels. It was hoped to introduce home recording kits available over the counter by 1992 but, sadly, this never materialised.

When dream funnels arrived at the library, there was a rough attempt to catalogue them according to subject. Children's dreams were always popular, among children of course, but also among adults who were keen to relive lost fantasies of flying and magical sweetshops. Dreams of elves and fairies were also much in demand among the Tolkien fraternity. There was also a large young adults section, in which dreams of popular celebrities were particularly common, although this section required regular updating, as dreams such as 'Kissed Everyone in Kajagoogoo' tended to fall quickly out of fashion. Other common categories of dream included Slow Running, Film, TV and Fiction, and General Wish Fulfilment. A small quantity of nightmares was reserved for the horror section. Library staff initially wanted to scrap the constant influx of Hideously Embarrassing dreams, but the underground success of 'Turned up

at the Office in my Underpants' followed by the near cult status of 'Sitting on the Potty at Junction 11 of the M6' proved that there was no accounting for taste. By far the largest section, however, was that comprised of dreams catalogued as simply Bizarre. This was, in effect, the bestseller section, containing such perennial favourites as 'Lecturing on Lizards in the Arndale Centre' and 'Turned into a Cartoon Lion'.

Sadly, the library's success was all too short-lived, following the depressingly inevitable abuse of the facilities. Rumours of multiple dream-viewing had been circulating since early 1987, but the fate of the library was sealed by the tragic case of Mr F. Travers, a student at Bradford University, who was found dead in his flat with three funnels, later found to contain 'God-daughter is a Werewolf', 'Drowned my Boss in the Fish Pond' and 'Hot Date with Julia Roberts'. A top-level inquiry followed and the Dream Viewing Programme was ruled to be 'too volatile for safe use by the general public'. The library was forced to close its doors for the last time in May 1991. The Great Thornham dream was over.

Milton Bisset knows only too well the history of that wonderful place now known as Snip 'n' Style. He has heard the urban myths surrounding its demise. There are tales of the dream junkies, spending night after night lying on the floor of abandoned third storey office buildings with their heads together, desperately trying to absorb each other's dreams. There is the rumour that all the collected dreams of Bradford were taken from the defunct dream library and buried under the new Centenary Square. For this reason, some bright (and cultured) spark has seen fit to write TREAD SOFTLY BECAUSE YOU TREAD ON MY DREAMS in black felt pen just next to the Town Hall steps. Milton now doubts this piece of folklore. Judging by the

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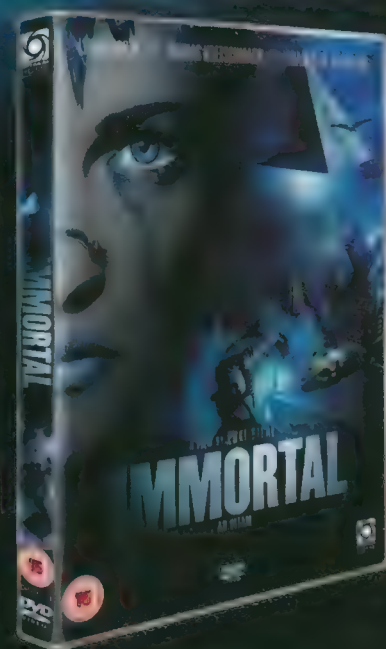
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The trouble with terrorists is that they're so difficult to unmask. Who, for example, is responsible for running a tubeload of explosives under the national monument that is *V for Vendetta*? – is it the Wachowskis, their director James McTeigue, producer Joel Silver, Natalie Portman's people, or something inherently rotten in the system itself? Is everyone guilty, or none? For guilty they certainly are; indeed, the most remarkable thing about *V* is that they had it more or less right at one stage, and threw it away. Back before *Matrix*, the Wachowskis' script for Joel Silver was one of the great unmade comics adaptations, up there with Sam Hamm's *Watchmen* and Roger Avary's *Sandman*. Early iterations of the screenplay were lean, effective, and deeply respectful of the Moore/Lloyd original, retaining much of the dialogue and most of the key plot and supporting characters. There were a few problems with the ending, which felt obliged to rework the source on the grounds that by Hollywood standards it had quite the wrong people killing one another; but a perfectly acceptable *V* film could have been made from this version, perhaps even one that Alan Moore could have been persuaded to leave his name on.

But what's wound up on our screens years later is a very, very different beast: a *V* whose stint in the redevelopment camps has seen it brutally re-engineered into a deformed mutant with no memory of its former life. Through a combination of forensic work and professional hunches, it's possible to piece together something of what's gone so wretchedly wrong in this no-survivors tubewreck of an adaptation. The central problem, oddly enough, seems to be Natalie Portman – not the actual performer, who does what she's required to reasonably well, but what she represents within the Hollywood system. For Portman is a class act, the top screen actress in her age-class, and any project that signs her up needs to be jolly sure it's doing enough to deserve her. So suddenly Portman is above the title and Hugo Weaving's *V* below; all the other female roles have been stripped out to make room for her accommodation; and Evey Hammond herself is no longer a clueless mid-teen victim and waif, but a posh twentyish BBC runner whose politicisation has begun long before the film opens, and who only needs a little push to throw her lot in with the forces of anarchism. (She even places all *V*'s quotations, including the Latin one – no mean achievement, as the production has actually retained the garbled version from David Lloyd's original panel, and gone to the trouble of embossing a mirror with the gibberish form.) And because



«To catalogue the inadequacies of this miserable film would be an undertaking beyond mortal patience»

this Evey is a grown-up, politically conscious adult, the central relationship has then to be rebalanced along more film-friendly lines, as excruciatingly summed up in the climactic dialogue from the film version: "I fell in love with you, Evey, like I no longer believed I could." – "I don't want you to die!" – "That's the most beautiful thing you could have given me." At the risk of punishment-beating the obvious, the whole point of the *V*/Evey relationship was that it wasn't a romance, but an intensely felt parental meditation on the father-daughter relationship as seen from the grim perspective of the entrenchment of Thatcherism, at a time when nuclear apocalypse seemed the only certain future and anarchism the only viable political creed.

Of course, it's easy to come up with excuses. The future has had to be updated. Terrorism is a different proposition in 2006. Evey was too fragile, too passive a character for the tastes of millennial pseudofeminism. The grimness of early Thatcherism is remembered only by those who lived through it, who for the most part are not the target audience for a Joel Silver movie. Or, if none of the above will wash, 'the story' needed it. All these are sentiments that the Wachowski-Silver team have doubtless spent enough years repeating to themselves that I'm sure they can mouth them with absolute conviction, but none of it will wash. If Sachar, Rowling, and even Dan Brown can qualify for a sense of respect for source, why is it so difficult to do the same with a genuine modern classic by an author who could boil the lot of them up for breakfast?

V for Vendetta was, with its jinxed sibling *Marvelman*, the first masterwork of the third great age of comics. It's still astonishing to remember that these were Moore's first series creations and *V* his first original strip; within a year of those extraordinary early issues of Dez Skinn's *Warrior* in 1982 – the year of *Interzone*'s own debut – Moore was writing *Swamp Thing* for DC, 2000AD was into its golden age, the graphic novel revolution and the British invasion that fuelled it were both decisively under way, and comics, not film, were the most exciting medium of the decade. *V* was a bomb under everything, and it still reads like nothing else since.

It certainly doesn't much resemble the movie. To catalogue the inadequacies of this miserable film would be an undertaking beyond mortal patience, so let's be content to note a few symptomatic things about the replotting. From the early minutes an interesting problem pops up, when *V* prematurely announces the ending to the nation – incidentally demolishing the careful act structure of the original, in which the modulation from vendetta to closing fireworks was part of a masterly sequence of revelation and escalation in our understanding of *V*'s plans. The central difficulty here is that Portman is very, very petite – a quality used to some effect in an early crowd scene – and there is no way on earth she can play the climactic scene where Evey appears to the mob in the role of *V* to keep his promise posthumously. And sure enough, she doesn't; the pre-emptive first-act promise is forgotten in favour of a fairly desperate new ending in

which not Evey but everyone else dons the mask and wig in a glorious democratisation of the terrorist urge. Nobody involved seems to worry that Parliament is not in the film any kind of visible instrument of the fascist regime, so that blowing it up at the climax is actually a demolition of democracy's last symbol. But then for a jackboot regime that's supposed to be stomping on a human face forever, the movie version is remarkably tolerant of things like free speech, smoking in pubs, and anti-government satire on TV. And how is it that Evey can now come and go as she pleases, yet never realise that the Shadow Gallery is part of a tube station?

Scars of surgical abuse even in post-production abound, as when Detective Inspector Finch's trip to Larkhill is cloningly flashbacked under a narrative monologue that includes an unexplained 'hunch' vision of an ending that isn't actually recognisable in the final edit. "It was strange. I suddenly had this feeling that everything was connected" – that'll presumably be the acid he didn't take in the film version, as it'd take some serious alteration to one's brain chemistry to see sense in the plot as it stands – adding in a *cri de coeur* "it was like a perfect pattern laid out in front of me, and we were all part of it, and trapped by it." Curiously, or perhaps not in the light of Larry W's personal journey, Valerie Page's inspirational tale of sapphic martyrdom is the one sequence to have made it more or less intact through all the drafts; and a handful of other moments of the real thing do survive, and even a few lines of good dialogue, though swamped by ill-judged improvements. But it's all vastly too long, with the final act in particular all over the place; as Finch complains after one particularly lengthy and pointless detour, "The son of a bitch sat there and spoon fed me that bullshit and I ate it up." In the end, we have to take comfort in the certainty that the real *V for Vendetta* will survive this film, just as the character on screen has survived recasting mid-film without reshooting. As if to remind us that talent, like terrorism, is faceless and endlessly replaceable, we're left to guess from moment to moment whether the face on the screen, so enthusiastically nodding to show where the voice is coming from, is Weaving, James Purefoy, or a stand-in or stunt double, because beneath the mask is nothing but an idea; and really good ideas are bullshitproof.

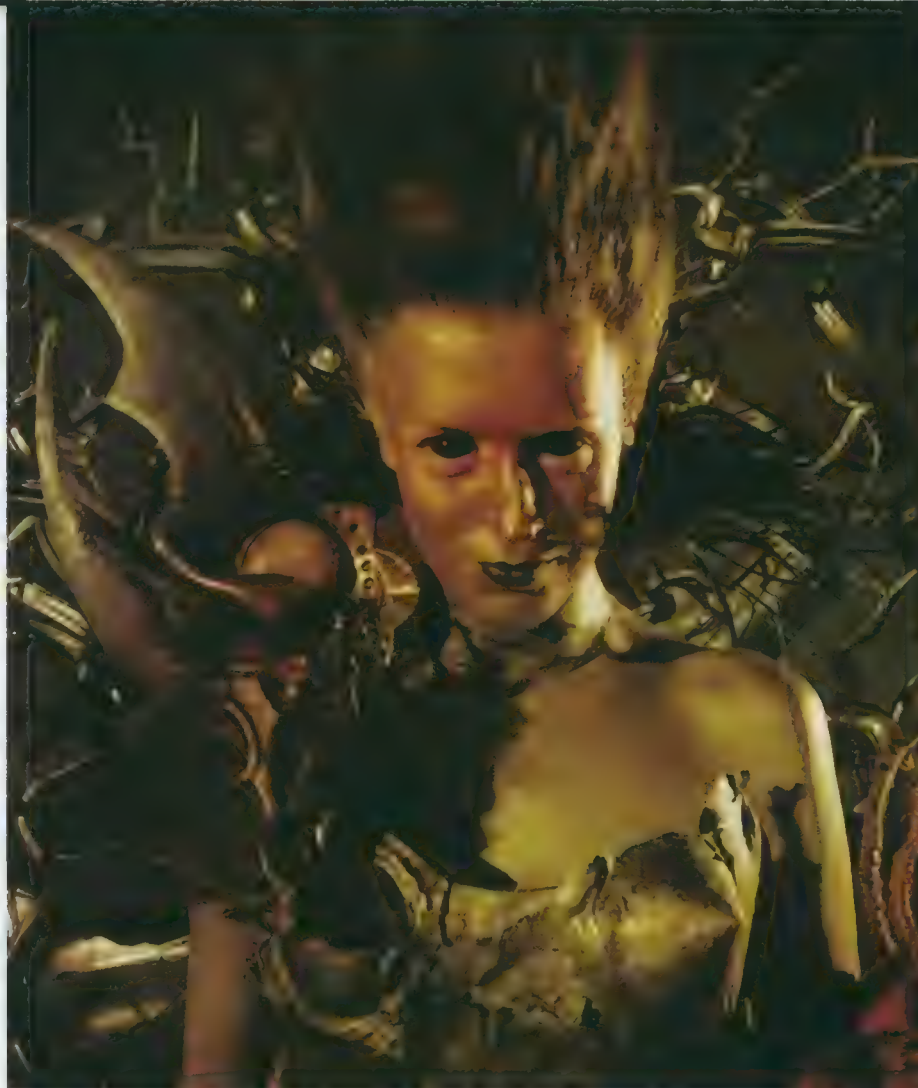
« The gymnastically bomb-toting lead is Hitler-haired Charlize Theron's spiderwalking freedom warrior battling the totalitarian management of Earth's last city »

V's ominously tainted words 'A UK-German coproduction' also adorn the season's other shambolic terrorist romp, **Aeon Flux** (or apparently *Aeon Flux*, spaces apparently being passé in the future). Gale Anne Hurd occupies the Joel Silver chair for this doomed adaptation of the once hip, long since forgotten MTV animation, another project that's been knocking around a decade longer than was good for it. This time the gymnastically bomb-toting lead is Hitler-haired Charlize Theron's spiderwalking freedom warrior battling the totalitarian management of Earth's last city, as she strips away successive layers of improbable twist to reveal the real baddy, the real secret, and what really needs to be blown up in the finale to liberate her people from their centuries of servitude to silly architecture and new romantic couture.

It's not an unpleasant experience to watch, if only for its sheer resistance to embarrassment, as our heroine, variously abetted or impeded by sidekick Sophie Okonedo, bounds Lara-like

through stunts that include the art of whistling ball bearings, kickboxing in a hyperspatial kitchenette, and a desperate race through a shrubbery of death. Familiar faces from outside sf cinema are startlingly enveloped in bizarre makeup and costumes: Frances McDormand in colossal red backlit hair, Pete Postlethwaite as a rugose cone. The narrative has a gamelike abstraction even by Hollywood standards, consisting mostly of level-transitions from one space to the next as new goals and new interpretations of the plot come into view, and all the characters are eerily depthless. "I had a family once," voiceovers Aeon in what sounds for all the world like a desperate attempt to texture her character up a bit in post-prod; "I had a life. Now all I have is a mission." (Simultrans: I had a backstory once; now all I have is stunts.) As it turns out, this meshes rather well, if unintendedly, with the revelation is that all the characters in the film are faded copies of themselves: "Our minds are unravelling... We're just ghosts." That would, indeed, explain a lot.





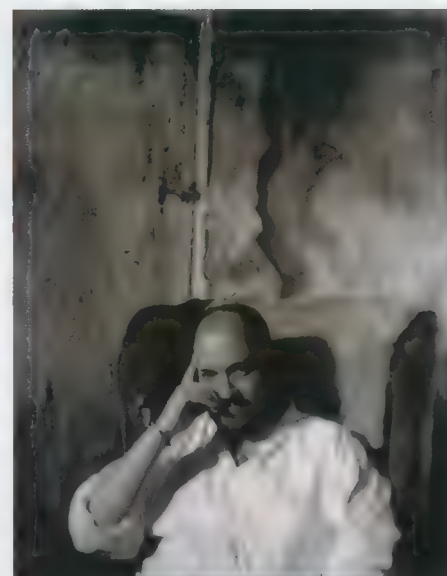
« The story was co-devised, and though the dialogue has some cherishable Gaimanisms it's McKean's [below] design and direction that's the revelation »

concepts rather than plot and character in the conventional sense, and engagement is visual rather than emotional; and while this may not be what was intended, it emerges as one of the film's great strengths. A phenomenal workgang of the nation's most talented has been recruited to take on the design of the many set pieces, resulting in a film so crammed with eyepopping visions that the able and well-chosen human cast find it hard a lot of the time to be more than furniture. Helena's bedroom walls, for example, are plastered in drawings by the godlike Ian Miller, which if anything rather lends support to her ironic initial ambition to run away from the circus to a life of her own in the real world. Instead, the ending promotes the most feckless mirrorworld character to romantic prospect and future heir to the circus dynasty, which is neat but inevitably anticlimactic. That girl should be making a career for herself in pictures.

One radical alternative to the terror of *V* is to let the comics people make their own film, as half-happened last year with *Sin City* and the Henson company have now done with the legendary team of Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean for the latter's astonishing directing debut **Mirrormask**. It's difficult to prise apart the creator roles: Gaiman's screenplay credit is amazingly his first since *Princess Mononoke* (though much more is in the works), but the story was co-devised, and though the dialogue has some cherishable Gaimanisms it's McKean's design and direction that's the revelation. Whether it has an audience beyond the fanbase remains regrettably untested, since *Mirrormask* has had a strange and rather unhappy delivery – its release fanfared with no fewer than three exquisitely beautiful tie-in books, presumably commissioned before a crisis of distributor nerve saw it slipped gingerly out on the arthouse circuit rather than wide to multiplexes as must have been the original plan. The modest brief was for a cheap and belated successor to eighties hits *Dark Crystal* and *Labyrinth* – films that are utterly transcended by the result, which is at least six times too imaginative to pass for a conventional film. And indeed, it's easy to see

why people used to putting normal films in cinemas for normal people might have felt a bit of a chill around the toes. Adult films with child leads are a risky genre, and *Mirrormask* doesn't even look like other films, with a sort of digital vaseline of dreams on the lens of most shots (presumably to save money by not having to render full screensworth of detail).

The fairly freeform plot has Stephanie Leonidas' teen heroine rabbit-holed into a Svankmajeresque otherworld when her circus family is struck by Totoro mum disease, while her place in this world is taken by a dark twin who wears lots of black makeup, zips, and studs, and must be returned to her place before she unmakes her good sibling's life back in Brighton. (Great Gaiman line here: "She's destroying the world and eating chips and snogging boys and smoking and everything!") You can see how this could have passed for fairly safe family fare at development stage, and indeed one of the things that don't really work about *Mirrormask* is the attempt to wrap a conventional-looking family plot and emotions around its outer shell. But in a way that fans of its creators will have no problem with but outside audiences could, the narrative is driven by images and





« Initially it seems ominous that the film is entirely about its own making, with the story being told by Ray and Gary in a pitch meeting to Bill Pullman's fictional documentarist »

Even further down the budgetary back passage of this all-British month of oddballeries is **Alien Autopsy**, a slight but amiable retelling of Fortean terrorists Ray Santilli and Gary Shoenfeld's 1995 hoax footage of a Roswell alien being dissected. Along with the crop circle phenomenon whose crest it rode, the Santilli hoax was one of the pivotal moments in the teeter and fall of ufology – a complex phenomenon that gets variously blamed on *The X-Files*, the rise of the internet, and the falling-out and discrediting of the authors of the canonical Roswell narrative itself. None of that story is the subject of *Alien Autopsy*, which focuses less on the culture of credulity and conspiracy itself than on the ease with which its media arm could be exploited by a couple of bungling scammers on the make. And if it has the slightly strained quality of most British 'based on a true story' heartwarming fables of enterprise against the odds, with a lot of characters enthusiastically overreacting to rather weak plot points, it also has an edge of Dickian rug-pulling satire that isn't quite what one would expect from an Ant & Dec vehicle.

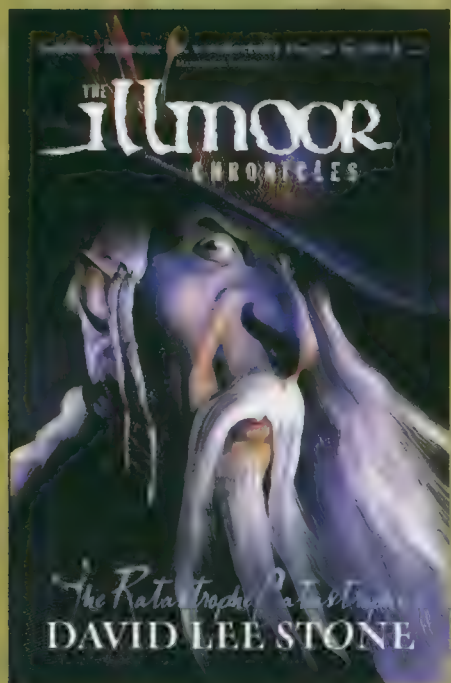
Initially it seems rather ominous that the film is entirely about its own making, with the story being told by Ray and Gary in a pitch meeting to Bill Pullman's fictional

documentarist at the real-life producer's office, and the story of the hoax footage itself built around a series of amateur story conferences, production meetings, screenings, and territorial rights auctions. But gradually that comes to be part of the point, as the layers of flim-flam pull apart to reveal the real-life duo at the end still clinging to their story that the fake footage was merely reconstruction of real footage, a version of which – or rather, of course, a more professionally faked reconstruction – we get to watch with our heroes at the climax. This mischievous invitation to believe in the face of repeated and confessed fabrication is reinforced by dropped-in shots of Pullman interviewing an entirely fictional FBI deep throat, lending spurious credibility to the claim that the Pentagon was genuinely in pursuit of the real film and that the truth is, despite all the confessions of scamming, still out there somewhere. But then our first sight of the 1995 Ray Santilli was as a cheeky chappie video pirate, a loveable-rogue version of the very breed of intellectual-property anarchist so sternly proscribed in the FACT notice prepended to the film. Is he hero, terrorist, or fool; visionary, villain, or victim? Is there anything at all behind the mask, or is the film itself just another layer of the scam? It all depends on your view. **Nick Lowe**

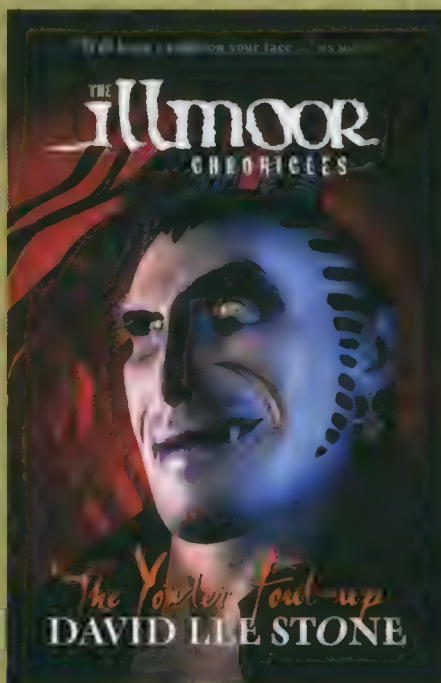


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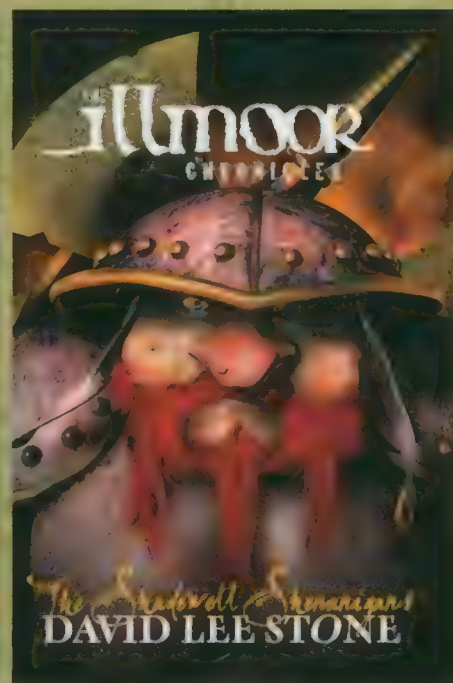
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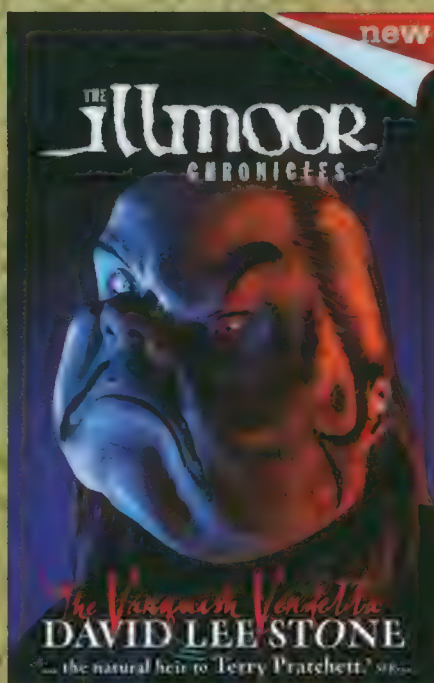
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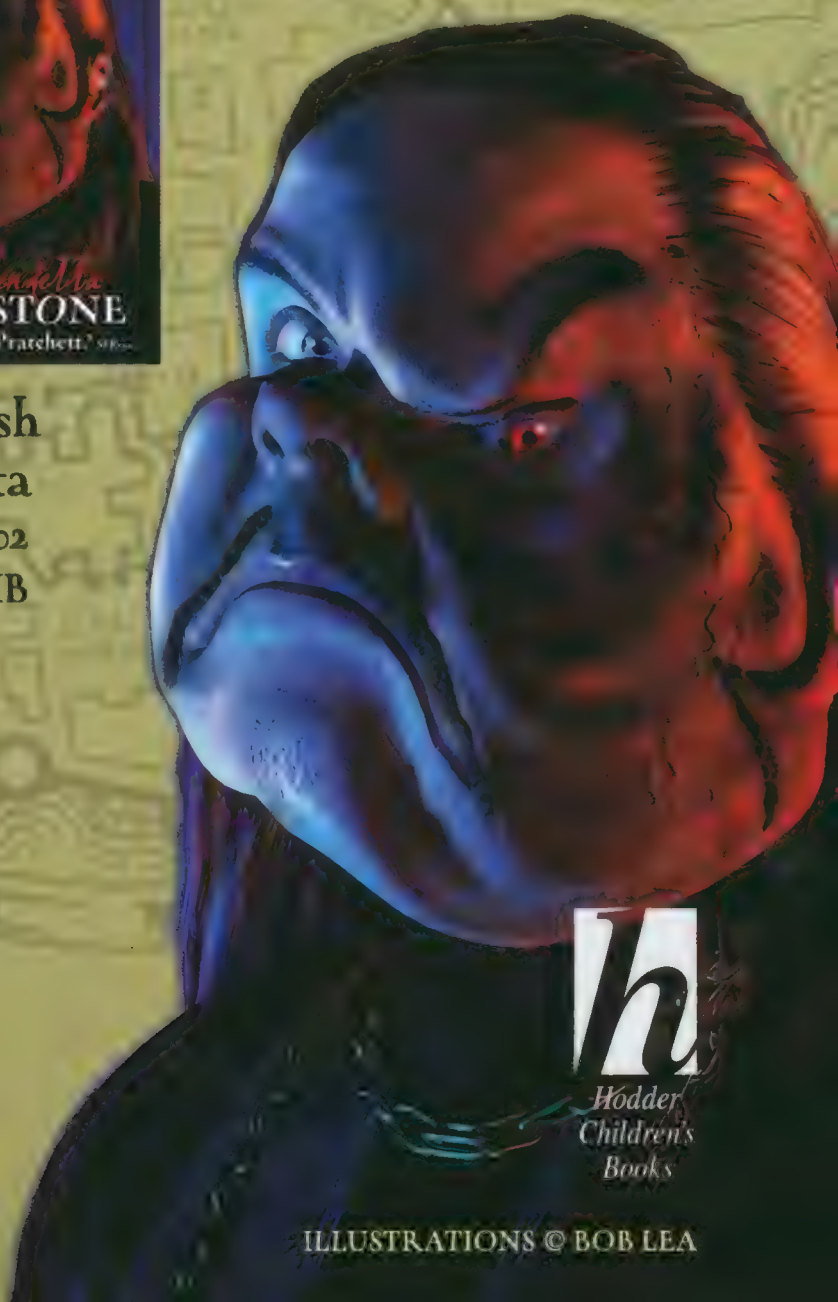
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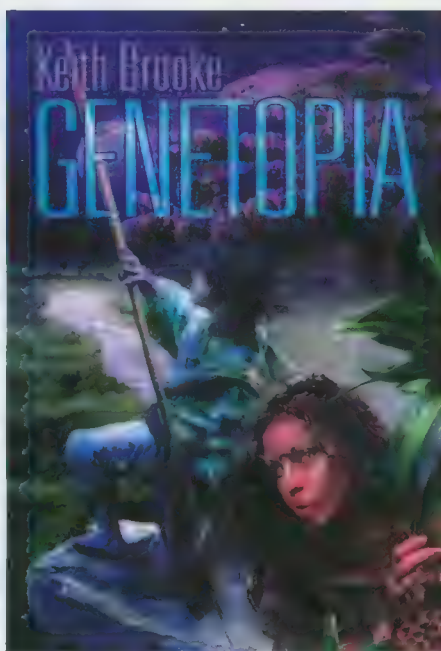
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There are breakthroughs, and there are breakthroughs. The term 'Conceptual Breakthrough' – which Peter Nicholls invented in the mid-1970s – neatly describes the central cognitive and narrative moment in sf when an established understanding of the nature of the world shifts convulsively into a new understanding of the world, a new paradigm. The *locus classicus* of the Conceptual Breakthrough – as Nicholls suggests in both editions so far published of *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (1979, 1993) – is probably the Generation Starship story, at the point when gates of perception open and the protagonist discovers that his universe is in fact a spaceship; that his previous world is a portal to the next; that Now is a stepping-stone, not a fissure. This is pure-quill sf aspirationism: Robert A. Heinlein's *Universe* (1941 *Astounding*; 1951), the greatest Generation Starship tale of all, sits about as close to the heart of the Golden Age as it's possible to get.

There is something odd here, though. Heinlein's novella does more than simply dramatize classic sf's central claim to advocate the future (it is an advocacy that has nowadays come to be seen as a very specific, culture-bound avowal of very particular futures), because there is a virus at the heart of the Generation Starship tale most poisonous to the dream, because the society that precedes the Breakthrough is not really a society which – as is pretty natural – resists the new; it is a society which *denies* reality. But Nicholls's Conceptual Breakthrough is designed to articulate the dramatic moment when resistance is turned into betterment. Conceptual Breakthrough is a punctuated version of the underlying Whig assumption that things get better; that however vast the insight offered, Progress is a continuum.

This all works pretty well for much of classic or First SF, but the Generation Starship story poisonously undermines any Whig assumptions about betterment, which may be why this mode seems so modern today: because the world as described to us by our Masters is a lie. All the protagonist's paranoia turns out to have been justified. Which is why Heinlein wrote the best of them. Heinlein's Law (it was never stated, but it minces barracuda-like through the deep waters of his greatest tales) is simply this: the world of the Masters is a plot against the truth.

Which is a good fit for 2006. Whether or not his influence is direct (it need not be), there is a lot of Heinlein in a writer like Keith Brooke of *Genetopia* – certainly both writers create



characters who are both fully rounded and, at the same time, almost journalistically over-clear to the eye (*Genetopia*, like Heinlein's greatest works, is best understood as a YA novel which makes nonsense of the YA label). But more to the point here, Brooke has done something very Heinlein-esque with *Genetopia*, making it very unlike an old-fashioned tale of Conceptual Breakthrough; with almost excessive clarity, Brooke has crafted what one might call a tale of Conceptual Recognition, a model almost never adumbrated in First SF – George R. Stewart's *Earth Abides* (1949) might fit the bill, but Stewart was an outsider. Conceptual Recognition is twofold: first, the world of the Masters is revealed to be a plot against the truth; second, the true world then revealed – the portal of perception for all of us – turns out to be the world we live in, truly understood. There is no future; there is only the swarm of Now.

Genetopia is quite remarkably fascinating, as long as denial is being depicted. The

Can't Catch Me, & Other Twice-Told Tales

Michael Cadnum • Tachyon, 184pp, \$14.95 pb

It is hard to know what Michael Cadnum could have done, other than not doing it. But there were good reasons for plunging ahead. Maybe there are all too many all too similar Twice-Told Tales told in an all too similar first-person-singular voice in *Can't Catch Me, & Other Twice-Told Tales*, but almost any one of them, taken singly, with lots of water, does charm; and some of them are very good indeed. The point of a Twice-Told Tale clearly resides in there being some point in telling the tale twice, and a few of the stories here are

setting is a world which could easily be our own planet aeons down the line. An ancient hitech civilization – never directly referred to – has disappeared, leaving behind a wide range of bioengineering techniques and artifacts. 'Smartfibre' and 'podhuts' and other quasi-organic products shape and connect and protect the relict inhabitants of this world, who are defined in terms of their clan (each clan has a particular bioengineering specialization) and as to their biological status: True Human (that is, true to a traditional definition of the human norm) or Lost (that is, once True Human but, through physical deformations or other more subtle changes, now genetically corrupt) or mutt (those not human from birth). The young protagonist Flint comes from a clan that specializes both in the breeding of mutts and the forced transformation in 'changing vats' of those deemed Lost. The changing vats, which contain a kind of mutagenic stew Brooke does not waste any doubletalk time explaining, are central to our growing awareness that Flint's entire culture is in a state of profound denial that True Humans (whose definition is arbitrary) are in any case declining, because the intense, blistering, tropical world of *Genetopia* absolutely prohibits stasis: constant, irreversible transformation is the truth of the world, a swarm of Now becoming Now Now Now Now, not necessarily for ill.

The plot is a pretext to tour the world while denial still holds sway. Flint's His younger sister Amber has been abducted and (we learn, though Flint does not) has been transformed by a changing vat into something rich and strange; Flint sets out to find her, travelling up and down the wide world in his search (in a world absolutely ruthless about the Lost, the dogged inveteracy of his search also constitutes a form of denial), undergoing various *rites de passage* en route as he matures, and slowly discovering that he lives in a culture clearly modelled on the historical

more like dutiful transpositions of voice and metre than they are significant new takes on these chthonic aides-memoires of our state as humans of the West (almost everything here is from Europe). 'Bear It Away' (2002) somewhat pedestrianly refits Goldilocks, but 'Can't Catch Me' (1994) is a neat ranting riff on the Gingerbread Man. The earlier stories do seem to convey more surprise than the later ones, as though Cadnum had gotten a little over-used to the slightly droning voice he has chosen to utter so many of his protagonists through. But the Harpy take in 'Hungry' (new here) works astonishingly well – until the last line at least, which reads like Neil Gaiman on an off-day making sure just everyone gets the point. And 'Elf

example of the slave states of America before 1865: a culture which was also, of course, built on denial. Flint is initially blind to the fact that his Stepin Fetchitt mutts, genetically coded so that they remain slavishly loyal to True Humans, are in fact slaves; but Brooke soon gives him a chance to catch up to every reader of the book by introducing him to a Crunchy-Con clan of vaguely religious tree-huggers who advise him to go with the flow, and to grok the diversity of all things that breathe, including mutts: "We're not lost, we're blessed with change," one of them tells Flint, in a passage a little too evocative of the feel-good, sermonizing tone modern-day sf is prone to when Breakthrough Becomes Homiletic. Whatever, Flint does grok and guru before very long, though only after experiencing a phased Conceptual Recognition of the fragility of his world, which is clearly about to collapse (though not until after the last page).

The problem with *Genetopia* is the problem with the Generation Starship tale: as soon as the world of the Masters is proven to be based on hysterical denial, that world collapses like a house of cards (a cliché which pretty precisely describes what happens here). As soon as Flint gets to grok and change, the artifact of the world dissolves around him, and he even forgets he'd been looking for Amber, though eventually she finds him. We are left with adroitly crafted but plotless paeons to the real world, which has always been there, odorous, biodiverse, complexly adaptive, pherotrophic, Dying-Earth-ish; echoes of Brian Aldiss's *Hot-House* (1962) flood the sensorium, to the credit of both books. To a certain extent we have been finger-wagged, but Brooke has clearly managed to craft an honest book out of slightly dishonest beginnings, a patently contrived quest narrative whose forward propulsion dies as it should in the rich panspermia of the real. *Genetopia* is a good surprise to read. Even its flaws are fun. I should say I liked the book a lot.

« It is hard to know what Michael Cadnum could have done, other than not doing it. But there were good reasons for plunging ahead »

Trap' (2001), on the other hand, ends with a savage little bang. In the end, it is not exactly easy to suggest that any overriding agenda drives Cadnum through these revisions – nothing like the passion that caused writers like Angela Carter, a few decades earlier, to twice-tell fairy tales into searing feminist assaults on our given wisdom. But one can say this, which does not seem dismissive: that if these are finger exercises, they have been performed by a writer with good fingers.

The Brief History of the Dead

Kevin Brockmeier • Pantheon, 272pp, \$22.95 hb

Kevin Brockmeier's second novel is so clever in so many ways, and so breathtakingly well written throughout, that it is almost a shame to have to say that *The Brief History of the Dead* does not really quite fill its sweet sonorous pages. The premise is stunning: after death, human beings travel through landscapes profoundly expressive of their natures toward

a vast, seemingly interminable city, where they reside until the last person alive who remembers on Earth also dies; at which point they pass onward (it may be) to a further state that (quite possibly) resembles Heaven as closely as the city resembles Limbo, or a one-way bardo. The original story from which the novel has grown, also called 'The Brief History of the Dead' (2003 *The New Yorker*), exquisitely focuses on the city of the remembered dead; subtly suggests that all of us – dead or alive – are vessels defined by the memories that fill us to the brim; beautifully renders the



Photograph • Benjamin Krain

sensations of the dead in language as leisurely and serpentine and sly and nudging as Nicholson Baker's; and stops there, at a point when the vessels begin to empty, and we all go home to somewhere. Except for the fact that the dead know they are dead, the story is a perfect Posthumous Fantasy.

To craft a novel out of this essentially backward looking vision of the human soul as a shape of memory, however, Brockmeier needed an engine to explain the crisis of depopulation which ends the story version. Half the resulting book-length text – its even-numbered chapters – are therefore set in a Near Future version of Earth deadly familiar to any sf reader, and it soon becomes clear why he has done so. For the bardo to depopulate, Earth itself must depopulate, and so Brockmeier posits the sudden assault of a manufactured virus which unknown parties have introduced into the central Coca Cola processing plant in Venezuela (vaguely, it turns out that it is now more efficient to bottle Coke in one plant, close to the last clean water source, and ship the stuff worldwide). Once into the world system, the virus spreads opportunistically. It is universally fatal. Coincidentally – it is a coincidence Brockmeier is disinclined to make much of – the Coca Cola firm has simultaneously sent a team of middle-management apparatchiks to Antarctica, where they will test the meltwater there for drinkability (global warming has devastated much of the planet) in a public-

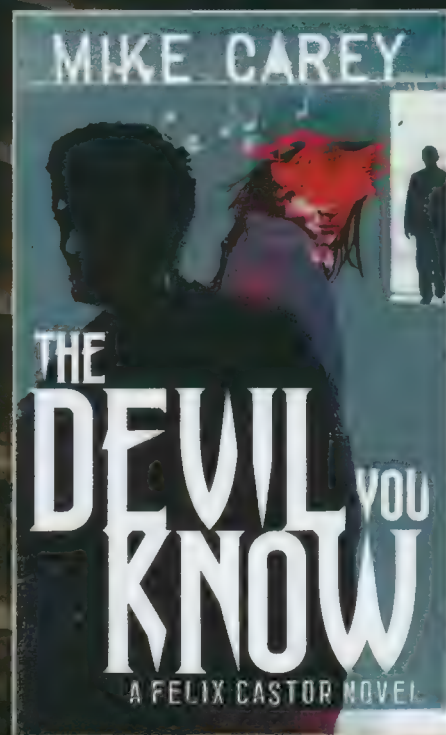
relations exercise. We soon discover that only one of the three apparatchiks still survives. Her name is Laura Byrd (Brockmeier has a habit of land-mining his text with echoes that do not compute, a kind of metaphor echolalia that becomes less amusing the more suggestively it tickles the mind but does not scratch the itch); she stopped drinking Coke some time previous; as almost any reader will guess immediately, she is the last human being alive. The only remaining residents in the city of the dead are people she remembers.

When she dies, the novel must end, so Brockmeier keeps her, rather implausibly, alive for several months. Her radio is defunct, she is trapped in a tent as winter, which even twenty years from now remains inhumanly cold, arrives, she gets into her powered sled and undertakes a doomed trek across ice and over crevasse in search of a station with a radio (which we already know would do her no good), in passages whose virtuoso detail owes something to a text Brockmeier openly acknowledges, Apsley Cherry-Garrard's *The Worst Journey in the World: Antarctic 1910-1913* (1922); but Cherry-Garrard's is a story of survival. Laura Byrd's is not. As we all know, she is going to die soon, and there will be nothing else to write about. Her story is beautifully told, but its inevitable outcome gradually corrodes attention.

Meanwhile, in the city, her memoranda slowly come to understand that one living person remembers them all, and that, because

nobody she does not remember still resides there, Laura Byrd must be the last person alive. It is here that Brockmeier's entirely estimable disinclination to engage himself deeply in the plot engines of sf or fabulation does begin to afflict *The Brief History of the Dead*. Because there is nothing for anyone to do – beyond registering those experiences of the thingness of things that Brockmeier executes superbly, and interacting with one another more humanely than they had managed in life – the book begins sinuously to shimmy and stall. The nadir may be Chapter Seven, which is entirely given over to the interior rant and aimless peregrinations of a severely damaged man obsessed by Christian guilts and passions. His interior monologue, composed mostly of Biblical tags and admonitions out of the punitive dark heart of that faith, will be familiar to almost any reader of the modern American non-generic novel, as this sort of thing is clearly catnip for modern American authors of non-generic novels. But it does nothing here but mark time.

In the end, if *The Brief History of the Dead* fails, it fails mainly because of its virtues: its sinuous registration of the workings of all the human senses; its utterly inescapable melancholy and knowledge of loss; its deep smooth unyielding belatedness. It fails because these virtues do not translate very readily into any engine of story; they may allow us to assume the end of the world (as the original short tale so superbly does), but they cannot seem to tell it. **John Clute**



The Devil You Know

Mike Carey • Orbit, 384pp, £6.99 pb

Mike Carey's *The Devil You Know* starts like many another hardboiled detective novel, with a down-on-his-luck hero tossing off disaffected lines while he takes a job he doesn't want. Even on the first page or two, though, there are already hints of something more: special pockets sewn into his Russian army coat to hold a dagger, a tin whistle and a chalice; and there's a rowan twig nailed up above the door of a upper-middle-class residence. The first chapter ends with a sting that blows away all preconceptions and sweeps the reader into a fast-paced supernatural mystery filled with ghosts, gangsters and other monsters in a contemporary London that is almost – but not quite – our own.

In the world of Felix Castor, the turn of the millennium signalled the sudden rising of the dead in unprecedented numbers all across the world – ghosts, zombies, demons and *loup-garous*. After-effects are still rippling through society, but one immediate effect is that Felix Castor suddenly has a marketable skill. Ever since he was a child, long before the millennium's transformation of society, he has had the ability to communicate with – and, more importantly, to exorcise – ghosts. It's a skill that hasn't come without pain. The

first ghost he banished was that of his own little sister, in a childhood exorcism that still fills him with guilt. At the beginning of *The Devil You Know*, Castor hasn't had the courage to use his skills for over a year, ever since an exorcism went wrong and he accidentally trapped a demon in his best friend's body. Now, that demon warns Castor that if he takes the next job offered to him, he will die...but loyalty to another old friend forces Castor to take the offer anyway.

By agreeing to exorcise a ghost from a highbrow London archive, Castor is swept into an underworld nightmare, full of mob bosses, thugs and death threats from both human and inhuman sources. Worse yet, he's forced to confront a moral issue he's been dodging all his life. Castor, like other commercial exorcists, has always told himself that the ghosts he exorcises are mere reflections, devoid of true humanity. An atheist himself, he's always ignored the theological implications of the act. However, events in the course of the book force him to re-examine all his assumptions and question whether he is releasing the ghosts he exorcises...or cursing them.

The Devil You Know fits neatly into the genre of dark contemporary supernatural thrillers such as Jim Butcher's Dresden Files, Laurel Hamilton's Anita Blake novels and Tanya Huff's *Blood* series, but it stands out from the rest by the sheer quality of the writing. In terms of the psychological issues

the hero has to confront, it's most comparable to Sean Stewart's literary fantasy *Perfect Circle*, another book about a likable loser haunted not only by ghosts, but also by the knowledge of the better man he himself could/should be. The plot, however, is sheer crime novel, with every twist and shock fitting neatly into the formula first established by Raymond Chandler. In a lesser writer's hands, the plot itself might feel disappointingly formulaic, but Carey's vivid and compelling prose leaves no room for disappointment.

Carey's writing background is in comics, and that proves to be a real strength in this novel, which brims with weird and wonderful images that might easily suit a graphic novel. The pacing is breathtakingly fast and exciting throughout, and the supernatural elements are utterly convincing, from a uniquely repulsive version of the were-animal myth to a succubus that manages to exude both sensuality and menace in equal amounts without ever descending into a misogynist mould. Best of all is the character of Castor himself, full of self-contradictions, moral ambivalence, deep loyalty and a basic up-yours stubbornness. He's a man who will shoot himself in the foot at every opportunity, but who also manages to become a hero. Escaping the mould in which he began, Castor develops strongly across the novel, and an unexpected twist at the end sets up an intriguing new direction for his next adventures. I can't wait to see what he does next.

▲ THE DEVIL YOU KNOW REVIEWED ▲ AUTHOR MIKE CAREY INTERVIEWED BY STEPHANIE BURGIS ▼

Lucifer is very much an exploration of my feelings about issues of faith and free will, and at the same time a sort of extended exploration of family dynamics – both things that were on my mind at the time when I was writing those stories. I think horror offered the right kind of metaphors for the things I wanted to say.

The character of John Constantine in *Hellblazer* was a given, but it's true that I got a huge, possibly unhealthy kick out of writing him – and ditto with Castor. You can do a lot with a character who's superficially ruthless and self-absorbed but turns out to have a complex and largely unexamined morality.

When was the original inspiration for the setting and the character of Felix Castor?
I came to London late; apart from a day trip to the British Museum when I was fifteen, I didn't set foot in the city until I was at university. But with few and very short

exceptions, I've lived here ever since. That gives me a weird kind of double vision: I see London with a lot of familiarity but still with an outsider's eye, and I think that's a great help when you're writing London as a setting – or as a character, which it almost is in the Castor books.

The fact that Castor is an exorcist without being a believer in any way, and the fact that he uses music to do what he does, arises out of one of the central ideas in the book – the rising of the dead and the reasons for it, which are unveiled slowly and piecemeal. I wanted a character who would be on the front line, as it were, when the graves started to open. Then as the series goes on, Castor becomes something a little different from that – and the moral about-face that he does was also one of the initial seeds of the character. I like that he's got guilt that he can never expiate, and that the guilt is tied in with the one thing he does better than anything else, the one thing that defines him. There's the inspiration, right there.

London has to be a major influence on the book.

Does the series take any particular pleasure in creating the worlds that he inhabits? Does this come any sort of pleasure about the way you've put the books addressed to people in Britain?

Not really, because I'm far from convinced that human beings have souls in any accepted sense. I suppose I do have an instinctive mistrust of people who believe that they've got all the answers – the fundamentalist mindset, if you like. I think most things that matter are complicated and messy and ambiguous, so I was never going to write a story in which the dead are the undifferentiated enemies of the living. It would have felt like a scam.

But the heroic exorcist figure is just one example of the heroic anything – the man or woman whose actions become their own morality, or have the moral framework stripped away from them so that it doesn't get in the way of the thrills and spills. I've occasionally written characters like that, but Lucifer, Constantine and Castor are in a different tradition. The difficulty you have in deciding whether there's any merit or virtue in anything they do is part of the point.

The Road to Dune

Herbert, Herbert, Anderson • Hodder, 489pp, £11.99 pb

Dune was first published in 1965, having been fixed-up from two novels serialised in *Analog*. For many readers at the time, Frank Herbert's originals must've seemed a less parched setting than the then somewhat barren lands of their first appearance. Herbert wrote two more *Dune* novels and, before his death in 1986, had completed a second trilogy.

But Arrakis (the planet known as *Dune*) is a world that clearly still exercises fascination. Herbert created a bravura exercise in world-building. Everything was worked out in painstaking detail, with consistent attention to all aspects of history and background, and with plenty of positively Byzantine interstellar politics and intrigue – all characteristics (though not necessarily all at once) of Frank Herbert's best work anyway.

Herbert's son Brian has collaborated with Kevin J. Anderson in producing several more *Dune* books, based mainly on notes and drafts left by Frank Herbert. The latest of these is *The Road to Dune*. Here the authors "take the reader to the creation of the *Dune* novels themselves." The mixture that we are actually taken to is, unfortunately, not quite so interesting. What *is* interesting are such things as the correspondence between Herbert and his editors. Also the selection of passages deleted from the published versions of *Dune* and *Dune Messiah* should satisfy the curiosity of the aficionado.

What is less satisfying is what makes up the connected centre of the book – four short stories plus the novel *Spice Planet* which was written by Herbert and Anderson from a detailed outline. *Spice Planet* is effectively an earlier version of *Dune*, done as a short adventure novel. Unfortunately the version as presented here, while making a good start on the desert background and unique inhospitable oddities of Duneworld, and all the intrigues, is only a slightly upmarket adventure story. *Dune* completists will be interested in such details as how the names of the characters and places changed, but *Spice Planet* otherwise contains none of the virtues of the later books. The characterisation is very black and white: everyone seems to be all good or all bad, with very little in between. The style is clear, direct, simple, and repetitious – very different from the *Dune* books, where you need to keep your reading wits about you. Maybe all this is OK for an adventure novel, but the *Dune* universe is so much more than that.

The Road to Dune has done a disservice to the object of its intended homage. Instead of reading it, a better thing to do would be to re-read the originals, or indeed any of Frank Herbert's other novels. **John Howard**

The Complete Chronicles of Conan

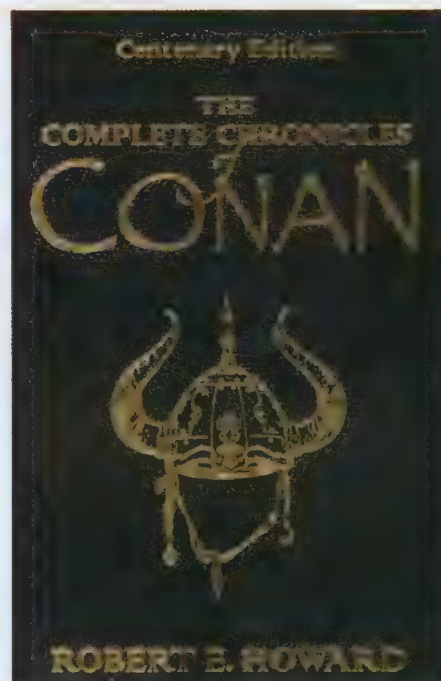
Robert E. Howard • Edited by Stephen Jones • Gollancz, 927pp, £18.99 hb

A couple of years ago, Gollancz published in their Fantasy Masterworks series a complete two-volume edition of Robert E. Howard's original stories of Conan the Barbarian. Howard originally published them, mostly in *Weird Tales*, between 1932 and his death; the Fantasy Masterworks edition, carefully edited by Stephen Jones, rearranged them to follow the timeline of Conan's life. (A couple of the earliest stories, 'The Phoenix on the Sword' and 'The Scarlet Citadel', actually fall late in the internal chronology, after Conan has become a king.) It's this work, rearranged back into order of publication, that forms the basis of Gollancz's new Centenary edition. The book is a handsome hardback, illustrated by Les Edwards, with an endpaper map of Howard's mythical prehistoric lands and a helpful afterword by Jones.

As for the stories themselves: well, it has to be said straight off that readers today will find some things that make them uncomfortable. Howard has a tendency, for instance, to head off into rambles about the 'degeneracy' of certain races; you start to wonder how that mapped onto the real world. Some of the dialogue is as bad as the parodies – you get the first "By Crom!" he ejaculated' on page 65, since you ask. And Howard has a weirdly underlined way of dwelling on Conan's physicality, and very differently on the sultry charms of the women he encounters, so that you wonder what version of him would have burst out if his mother's impending death hadn't triggered his own suicide at the age of 30.

Physicality, though, is the heart of these stories. Conan is pitched against those who know more than him – wizards, say, worshipping the dark arts – and so the stories work as a kind of demonstration of why action matters more than words. Take, for instance, this passage from 'The Black Stranger', picked almost at random:

The buccaneer missed a tremendous swipe with his headsman's sword as the Cimmerian ducked, and the great blade banged against the stone wall, spattering blue sparks. The next instant his skull-faced head rolled on the cavern-floor under the bite of Conan's cutlass. When you read a passage like that, you see that it's the verbs that are doing all the work, conveying all the information you need about what's happening: missed, ducked, banged, rolled. Everything else is just connective tissue between the actions. Every sentence points to the next one, and something happens in every sentence. Even when, as frequently happens, Conan is stalking round some deserted temple waiting for evil to



pounce, Howard knows just how long to keep the atmospherics going. He was hardly, you suspect, consciously interested in technique: if he had been, these stories would have steered clear of the said-bookisms and the leaps of tone which must have seemed clunky even to pulp readers of the 1930s.

It's interesting, too, how much you find in Howard that's familiar from other 'weird fiction' writers, most obviously H.P. Lovecraft. There's a perpetual sense of hovering nameless evil, encoded as ancient knowledge ready to be uncovered by the foolish. With Howard, of course, it can be defeated; with Lovecraft, you can only surrender, and gibber a lot. And Howard's prehistory is closer to the source, as it were: the magic is directly accessible, and some might think it can be controlled.

The Conan stories are obviously a taproot for much of modern fantasy, as well as for role-playing games. Apart from how early they fall in the story of genre fantasy, what really distinguishes them is how *solitary* Conan is. He doesn't hang out with a fellowship; he's not half of a double-act like Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser; the women who sometimes accompany him fade out of the story as often as they fade in. You suspect that Howard was writing a self-portrait that reveals him far more than he would have liked. But if we respond to these pulps, seventy years on, it's because he found a way of putting stories on paper that speaks to the reader so clearly and simply that you cannot help but follow.

Graham Sleight

Darkland

Liz Williams • Tor, 308pp, £10.99 pb

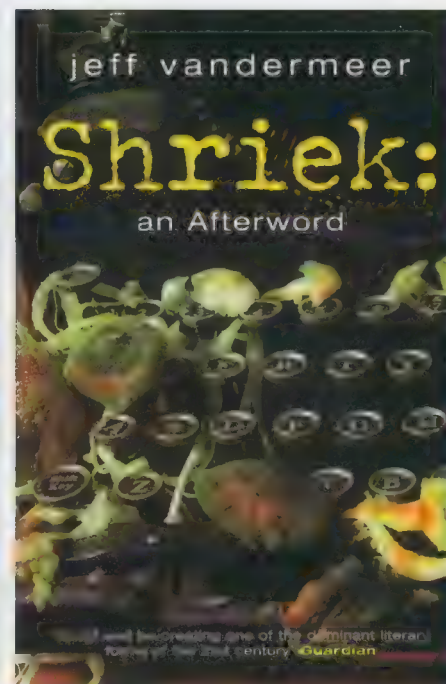
Darkland is not welcoming. Liz Williams's latest novel has barely begun when we are confronted with multiple graphic sexual encounters of, to put it mildly, ambiguous moral consequence. In this medium to far future, oppression is the watchword. Vali Hallsdottir, on a righteous assassination mission when we meet her, spends most of the story hunting someone or something – or at least that's how she spends the story so far, because *Darkland* ends with an abruptness that can only mean a sequel is impending.

This is, sadly, not the most frustrating thing about the book. Williams's writing is lean and clear, her double-stranded narrative is, mostly, elegantly laid out, and she raises interesting questions: but she never quite does those questions justice, because her characters and her worlds sit in slightly-too-neat boxes. The complexity that, say, Tricia Sullivan does so well is missing. Both Vali and the book's secondary protagonist Ruan, for instance, are deformed by relationships, either past or present; both are held in kinds of thrall, and both have to struggle against power imbalances. But in the end, the occasional satisfying moments of emotional honesty are undone by cheap vengeance – by the confirmation that the book's antagonists are firmly *wrong*. The cause is without a doubt just, but lacks nuance.

If this sounds like matter more suited to some kinds of fantasy than to science fiction, perhaps it is. The world seems too convenient



for the story to be sf proper. Most of the book's characters have mental powers of one kind or another, but for all that these are established as the combined result of genetic engineering and mental discipline, they never feel earned. Occasionally *Darkland* comes to the brink of saying something meaningful about the precise point at which science becomes magic, and about the unease to be found there, but each time Williams settles for merely recapitulating fantasy, and not investigating it. There is a dark tower; there are animal familiars; there is a mythic weapon; and there is a Something in the Depths. There is little that is not easy to leave behind. **Niall Harrison**



mushroom-like race called the gray caps. His sister, Janice, has been asked by a publisher to provide an afterword to his last book. This is what we are reading.

After several false starts, she finds that she is writing her own autobiography as well as Shriek's story, and soon has given up the pretence of this being merely an afterword. However, Shriek has not vanished. He has not only read the manuscript but has made copious notes elaborating and clarifying many of the details mention by Janice.

It sounds like an unreadable literary experiment, doesn't it? It's not. There's an early scene, for example, where a publisher rejects Shriek's latest book in such a caustically over-the-top manner that the reader will be laughing out loud. Later there is the war between two publishing houses that consumes the city with its fungal weapons. The old ruler, the Kalif, attempts to retake the city during it but only manages to introduce the horrors of a physical war. And then the gray caps intervene, in a truly chilling Lovecraftian way (if that's not damning with faint praise).

One of the delights of the past decade or so has been to watch Vandermeer emerge from the shadows of our own literary underground to stand as one of the finest writers in the field. Those of you who are already familiar with Ambergris will know what to expect. Those of you who aren't are in for a treat.

Jim Steel

« Ambergris is a strange place...and Shriek has seemingly vanished into its underworld, which is populated by an ancient, mushroom-like race called the gray-caps »

« Liz Williams's latest novel has barely begun when we are confronted with multiple graphic sexual encounters of, to put it mildly, ambiguous moral consequence. In this medium to far future, oppression is the watchword »

Sci-Fi Movies, Facts, Figures & Fun

John Grant • ff&f, 96pp, £5.99 hb

This cute little hardback has absolutely no intention of being a definitive guide to SF movies. Maintaining a light tone throughout, it takes us on a journey from 1902 to the present day, looking at the very best classics and the most dire (and sometimes equally classic) trash.

There's also short profiles of directors, chapters on SF sex and animation, and a listing of awards. Despite the repetition of movies being covered more than once, the overall package is entertaining and brief enough to be fun to read thoroughly – unlike some longer, drier tomes. **Sandy Auden**

Shriek: An Afterword

Jeff Vandermeer • Tor, 370pp, £10.99 pb

You're a writer, aren't you? These days everyone is a writer, one way or another, or is intending to get around to it soon enough.

Duncan Shriek is a writer; a historian, to be exact, in Ambergris, a city in a world that is a couple of steps sideways from our own. There's a hint of Peake's baroque society about the populace that Vandermeer seems to acknowledge with the Shriek/Groan wordplay, but this is a unique creation. Ambergris, even by the standards of its own world, is a strange place, and Shriek has seemingly vanished into its underworld, which is populated by an ancient,

The King's Last Song

Geoff Ryman • HarperCollins, 488pp, £10.99 pb

You will find this novel in the mainstream section of the bookshop – that is, it contains nothing to stretch the credulity of the average reader. Given that it wears the Cambodian killing fields like a skin, this shows just how much we are able to accept.

The characters are asked to accept much. Present day Cambodia contains many people who are saturated with the horror of the twentieth century. Luc, a French academic, who left Cambodia before the war and didn't live through the excesses, has lost friends to it. His moto-boy, a teenager called William, is too young to have lived under the Khmer Rouge, but lost most of his family to them. Map (every adventure needs a map) is a policeman who was once a Khmer Rouge cadre. There are several others, but Map is one of the main keys to this novel. Initially it is hard to get behind his crazy macho mask, but



we have to keep reminding ourselves that he is a monster, or has, at least, done monstrous things. As we start to see through his mask, his old commander appears. Map knows that Rith is a true monster, but we meet Rith as an all too human young man in pre-revolutionary days, in one of many flashbacks that put flesh on the characters. He, too, is like us. Is their redemption possible or even necessary?

And we drive onwards. In a field near Angkor Wat, archeologists discover the gold book of Jayavar VII, who ruled Cambodia in a Buddhist golden age during the twelfth century. On the way to the airport, Luc and the book are kidnapped. That is the spine of one plot.

Another part of the novel gives us a linear life of Jayavar, showing that there can be hope and goodness for a while, but the universe turns like a wheel. One part of the novel moves towards the creation of the book, the other towards its fate. We are even given leafs of the book throughout the novel, to allow us to see the importance of it, and there is also, in a rare joke, a hint that the Khmers had a familiarity with Oulipo.

This is a remarkable novel. Ryman has taken very important themes and dealt with them successfully. The fact that it is also a rattling good adventure is almost irrelevant – but not quite. **Jim Steel**

Visionary in Residence

Bruce Sterling • Thunder's Mouth, 320pp, \$15.95 pb

The title of Sterling's latest collection of short stories challenges the reader whilst providing us with an answer. It is, in Sterling's mind, himself since that is one of his many job titles. It also asks the reader to think differently about little things like what we think is science fiction. Each story has a short introduction which either elucidates or infuriates but always challenges.

It is an eclectic collection of stories covering all sorts of areas such as biology, physics, crime, fantasy and design. Some are forward looking and some very backward looking but all deal with that thin line between the real and unreal and how thrillingly thin and dangerous it can be at times. The opening story, 'In Paradise', is a straightforward sf story using a translation McGuffin but it is racial tension that really drives the story. Even his so-called mainstream story comes from the cyberpunk milieu but it does ask how we, as readers and possibly writers, view what we call the future and how it can be written about.

Sterling comes alive with the design and architecture stories which do not focus as much on the people but on the ideas and ways of thinking. The shift of style in 'User-Centric' was a little off putting but perhaps that is the purpose. He comfortably changes the direction of the story in the middle and makes the reader really think about the tale



they have just read. Sterling keeps the reader on their back foot and also makes them confront their own prejudices about what the reader thinks is science fiction.

Perhaps this is where the author has arrived – that it is the idea, the subtle shifting of ground that excites and allows for a certain polemicism. This time around the argument is in the writing of stories rather than samizdats. The polemicist has not changed but has combined approaches from pure science to design, all of which make for very readable and highly enjoyable fiction. **Iain Emsley**

A Mention Here Does Not Preclude A Full Review

Zootsuit Black by Jon George (Tor, 324pp, £10.99 pb). Ipswich author's second sf novel following *Faces of Mist and Flame*. Out now ♦ **The Ephemera** by Neil Williamson (Elastic Press, 217pp, £5.99 pb). A collection of sixteen sf/slipstream stories, one of which was published in *Interzone* and five of which were published in its sister magazine *The 3rd Alternative*. Out now ♦ **James Tiptree, Jr: The Double Life of Alice B. Sheldon** by Julie Phillips (St. Martins Press, 480pp, \$27.95 hb). The reclusive James Tiptree Jr wrote sf with a 'quintessentially masculine feel' but was actually Alice B. Sheldon. This is her life story. Out in August ♦ **The Space Opera Renaissance** edited by David G. Hartwell & Kathryn Cramer (Tor, 941pp, \$34.95 hb). An overview of the subgenre which includes major works by many major writers. Out in July ♦ **Comics Creators on X-Men** edited by Tom DeFalco (Titan, 252pp, £14.99 pb). Interviews with the major talents involved in the X-Men series, including Stan Lee. Out now ♦ **Paragaea: A Planetary Romance** by Chris Roberson (Pyr, 400pp, \$25 hb). Hard sf novel 'in the tradition of the planetary romances of Edgar Rice Burroughs and Leigh Brackett'. Out now ♦ **The Thousandfold Thought** by R. Scott Bakker (Orbit, 504pp, £12.99 pb). The final book of the fantasy series 'The Prince of Nothing'. Out now ♦ **Children of Chaos** by Dave Duncan (Tor, 349pp, \$25.95 hb). The first book of a quest duology by the Scottish fantasy novelist. Out in June ♦ **Doctor Who: The Resurrection Casket** by Justin Richards; **The Feast of the Drowned** by Stephen Cole; **The Stone Rose** by Jacqueline Rayner (BBC, £6.99 pocket hb). Three novels featuring the new Doctor and Rose. Out now ♦ **Babylon** by Richard Calder (PS Publishing, 248pp, £25 hb). Novel set in the same world as 'After the Party' from *Interzone* issues 201, 202 and 203. Out now ♦ **Roger Corman: Metaphysics on a Shoestring** by Alain Silver & James Ursini (Silman-James, 323pp, \$24.95 pb). Chronicle of Corman's films. Out now

Hyperion + The Fall of Hyperion**Dan Simmons • Gollancz, 473pp + 535pp, £7.99 pb**

When *Hyperion* and *The Fall of Hyperion* were first published, they generated a huge amount of excitement. Fifteen years on, the paperback reissue of both titles provides a welcome opportunity to reassess their impact on the genre. Reading them now, *Hyperion* in particular, I can understand why they attracted so much attention at the time.

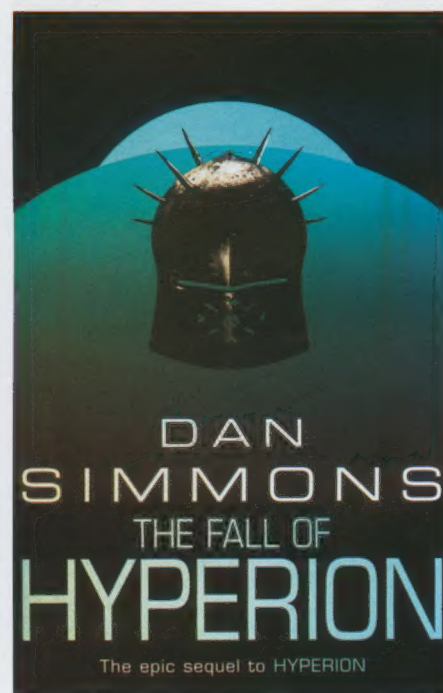
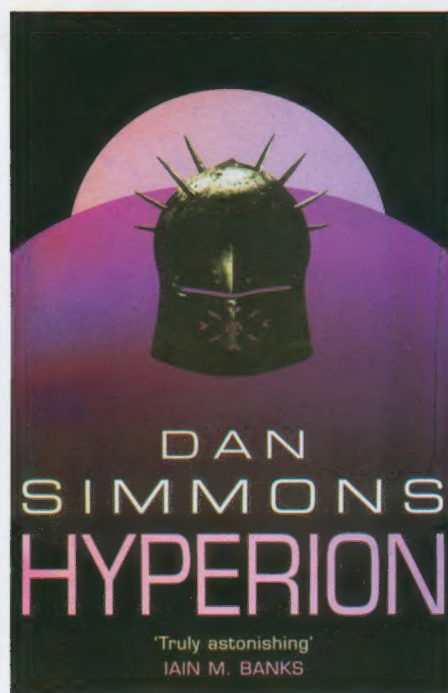
Hyperion has everything one could hope for in a space opera: a galaxy-wide culture, the Hegemony, linked by the Web, which permits instantaneous travel by farcast; mysterious alien invaders, equally mysterious alien artefacts, a small group of humans pitted against forces beyond their ken, other humans involved in political manoeuvring of such intricacy it does take two readings to work out precisely what's going on, artificial intelligences – you name it, it's there. The death throes of a galaxy-wide civilisation are played out through the novels, echoing the fall of the gods and the rise of new gods, as portrayed in John Keats's original (unfinished) poems.

It is a rich mixture, but we could all think of other authors who had done something similar. I was reminded of C.J. Cherryh's early works, and of Jack Vance's Dying Earth novels; in fact Simmons unashamedly referenced Vance's novels a number of times. And not just Vance. What made Simmons distinctive then, what continues to make his work distinctive and exciting for many

people, is the way in which, alongside the component parts of very well-written space opera, he plays fascinating games with the literary canon. Apart from the inspiration provided by Keats's poems, the first of the novels is structured as a series of tales which do homage to Chaucer and to a number of different genres. I identified references to Shakespeare, Yeats and J.G. Ballard, among others. The references to Keats are legion, and indeed his avatar plays an important role in both novels. I feel sure there is much else I have missed so far.

There is something so joyful about Simmons's uninhibited pillaging of the literary classics that it is very easy to get caught up in the game of reference-spotting, when maybe one should be stopping to ask 'why is he doing this?'. It is clearly more than just a *jeu d'esprit* for Simmons, but it is significant that the second volume is calmer, and settles for one narrative viewpoint, that the literary games are more restrained? Frankly, I do not know. It is, I think, entirely possible to read the two *Hyperion* novels without knowing a thing about the literature they reference, and enjoy them as the solidly written, intelligent space opera they are. But once you start reading the novels, plays and poems that Simmons references, there is no doubt that the stories develop a richer flavour. Maybe it is as simple as Simmons wanting to encourage us to read more widely, and recognise how science fiction participates in the broader literary canon, in which case, it is as much a pleasure to do that as it was to read these two influential novels. **Maureen Kincaid Speller**

« There is something so joyful about Simmons's uninhibited pillaging of the literary classics that it is easy to get caught up in the game of reference-spotting »

**Rainbows End****Vernor Vinge • Tor, 368pp, \$25.95 hb**

The year is 2025. The world is wired. Alfred Vaz, undercover WMD investigator for the Indo-European Alliance, is playing games within political games. He has recruited a mysterious online agent to assist him in an investigation that has more hidden levels than his co-workers realise.

Meanwhile Robert Gu, erstwhile feted poet and general misanthrope, is being raised out of the crevasse of Alzheimer's that has isolated him for years. The world that modern medicine restores him to is a far cry from the one he remembers; he has a lot to learn, and there are plenty of people with a vested interest in him learning certain things rather than others.

Compared to Vinge's past output, *Rainbows End* is a short book. It also differs in its definite timeframe; this story gives the impression of being as much a prediction as it is a piece of entertainment. It is a credit to Vinge's genius that neither facet overwhelms the other. The near-future world he describes is fascinatingly plausible, while the story itself is brilliantly compelling.

This edge is due to the skilled use of character to drive the narrative. Vinge has created a cast of flawed and believable protagonists, who interact and double-deal in ways that reveal their inner drives. The reader is absorbed thoroughly – wanting to help out characters in distress and dish the dirt on the bad guys. The line between the two is often fairly thin.

The technology is more than enough to satisfy a speculation addict. On the surface is a modern information society in full flower, but lurking beneath are subtle elements of totalitarian dystopia. A panoply of tropes are deployed, from the notion of fully immersive entertainment media and multiple levels of virtual reality, through to wearable computer hardware, library digitisation and intelligent architecture, to name but a few.

Rainbows End examines our present through the lens of an imagined future, one that we simultaneously yearn to live in and fear may come to pass. The thoroughness of Vinge's world-building and the measured revealing of the end product make this a stunning and visionary novel. **Paul Raven**

« The technology is more than enough to satisfy a speculation addict. On the surface is a modern information society in full flower, but lurking beneath are subtle elements of totalitarian dystopia »

Space 1889: Episodes 3 and 4

Noise Monster Productions, 70/60mins, £10.99 CD

Imagine a world where the Victorians have reached Mars, in space-faring versions of ships like the Nautilus, only to discover that humanoids have been living there for millennia. The British want to extend their Empire, the Germans want a piece of the action and the Martians are trying to fight them both off and keep their culture intact.

Against this backdrop, Sergeant Carstairs and his superior officer, Captain St John-Ffolkes, are trying to rescue the Martian Prince, Skerrun, after their spaceship crashed but the mission goes awry and they themselves are drawn into a political plot that is wiping out an entire Martian city...

The Siege of Alcyon is a rip-roaring audio adventure featuring some wonderfully Victorian attitudes and an emphasis on action. There are explosions aplenty and the characters are surprisingly fleshed out, given that all of the story is told via dialogue alone. You see, none of the *Space 1889* stories feature a narrator. This happily makes you feel like you're in the thick of the action, but sadly it confuses you occasionally when it moves from scene to scene. The trick, I've found, is to listen closely to the background music too.

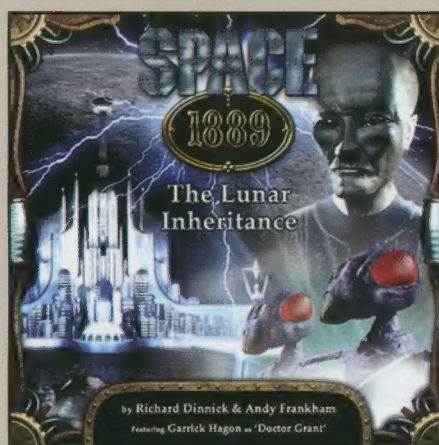
The background music in the next episode, *Lunar Inheritance*, could easily have been inspired by the *Forbidden Planet* movie soundtrack with its strange percussion sounds. The first of the *Space 1889* adventures set away from Mars, *Lunar Inheritance* features the Brits against the Russians.

William Brooker is an archeologist accompanying a military mission to rescue his old professor from Earth's apparently lifeless Moon but when their spacecraft is shot down by a lightning weapon, Brooker has to guide the ship's captain below the surface of the moon and into even more danger.

With more movie overtones (*Indiana Jones* and *The Time Machine*) there's not a quiet moment to be found in *Lunar Inheritance*. The insectile alien K'chuk is innovatively portrayed in sound and the character dialogue is sharp and expressive.

Both of these stories have superb sound quality and audio special effects that are convincing and support the story. They're fun and entertaining and an enjoyable alternative to the written word.

Sandy Auden reviews *Space 1889* and interviews Toby Longworth, who plays Sergeant Carstairs

**Where did the character of Sergeant Carstairs come from?**

Whenever I read a script I always try to find someone to base the character on. It may be a real person or an actor or a part or a character. And then you get a good chance to understand the symbolic meaning of that character. It's 'what's the point of this guy?'

Sergeant Carstairs is a cross between Bob Hoskins, Stanley Baker as an officer in the movie *Zulu* and another guy who's not on the cast list but who was Welsh and sang a lot. Sergeant Carstairs is completely steadfast and ready to die for his country but more readily he's prepared to die for his commanding officer with whom he has the closest relationship.

How long does it take to record an episode?

We usually get through our part of an episode in a day, although we have been known to do a couple of days. One of the ways Noise Monster work is to have separate booths for each performer. So each individual performance is on a separate track, which allows for post production to take care of the individual distances and approaches and sound effects etc. The overall episode takes longer than a day of course because a lot of the associate atmosphere is laid in afterwards.

If you're in a booth on your own, don't you miss the interaction with the other actors?

It's a very odd one that, because I would have imagined it to be harder to act because it's very valuable to be able to hit someone else's eyes. But when you're wearing cans, the intimacy of the voice in your ears like that allows for a very immediate connection with the other performers.

I've often felt when you're working in a medium where people are going to be hearing it as a speaker right next to their ear, that atmosphere of intimacy is one which is incredibly valuable.

What's the key to being a good voice actor?

A lot of actors who have just started doing voice acting/audio will listen back to their voices and often find that they're very flat, with very little intonation. That's usually because they've never taken their voice away from the rest of their acting facilities – their gestures, facial expressions etc, they've never used it in isolation. They rely on other elements to tell the story and the voice just doesn't taking enough of the role.

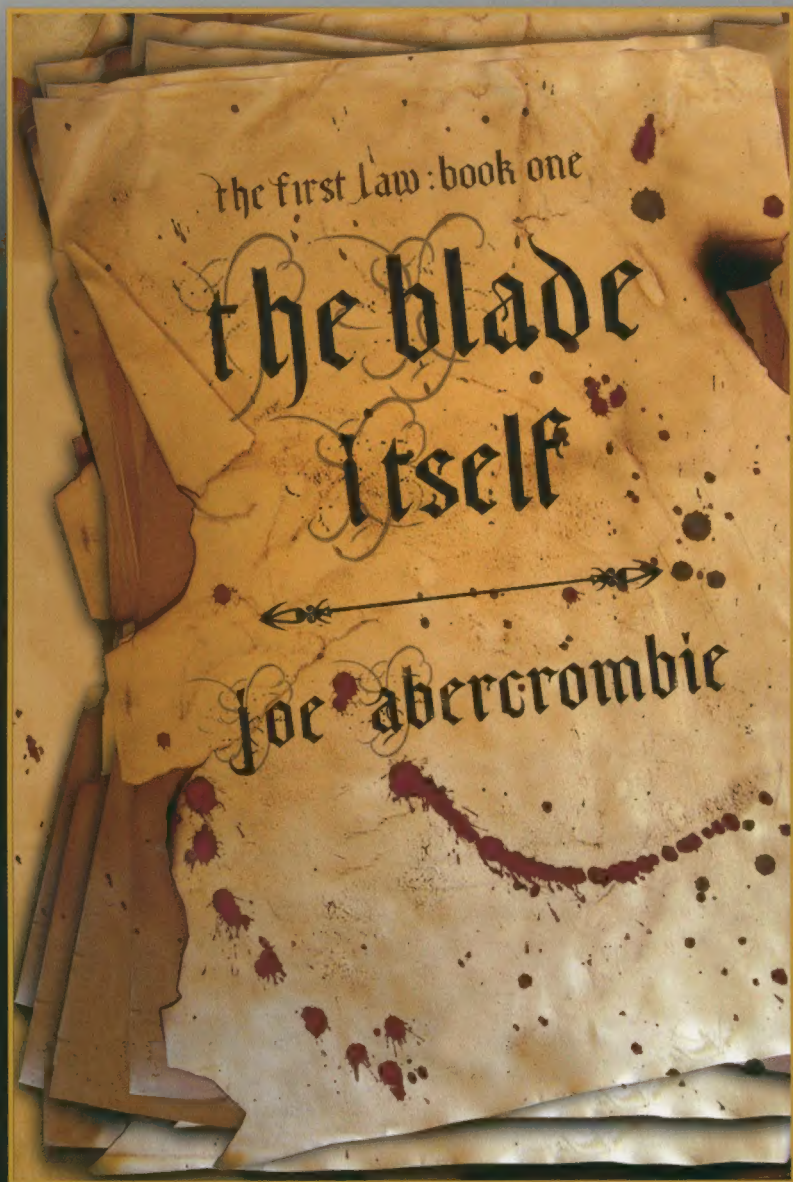
Perversely, when you're recording it's quite useful to move your hands and gesticulate and to do all the things you normally do performing it in vision but it's important to make sure that your voice is the one that's actually doing acting. All the visual moves need to be funnelled through the voice so that that level of expression is actually heard.

Fantasy - at the sharp end

Nobleman, dashing officer and shallow-as-a-puddle Captain Jezal dan Luthar lives a useless life of ease by cheating his friends at cards. And Inquisitor Glokta, cynic, cripple and torturer extraordinaire, can't stand the sight of the preening idiot.

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